



## **There's no place like home**

By **Milton Little, Joe Finn and Susanne Beaton**

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Earlier this year, the state's Policy Academy on Family Homelessness issued a major challenge: If our nation could promise in 1961 to put a man on the moon in 10 years, why not make the same commitment to ending homelessness in Massachusetts in 10 years?

We believe this goal is worthy of aiming high - and we are encouraged that the stars are beginning to align to put it within reach.

In the past few months, a broad coalition of government leaders, policy experts and academic leaders have embraced "Housing First," a bold new policy approach to ending homelessness in Massachusetts. The approach places individuals and families into permanent housing as quickly as possible. It's a simple idea that can and will change people's lives and allow them to escape poverty in the long term.

While the emergency shelter system is a critical safety net for individuals and families in crisis, studies are showing that children living in a shelter system suffer unintentional social, emotional and educational harm that is often irreparable.

The National Center on Family Homelessness reports that within a year, 41 percent of homeless children will attend two different schools and 28 percent will attend three different schools. Health risks homeless children experience include:

- Four times higher rate of asthma;
- Seven times higher rate of anemia;
- Four times higher rate of learning disabilities;
- Three times higher rate of emotional and behavioral problems.

In the last 30 years, the numbers of homeless children and adults and the number of emergency shelters have continued to grow. While millions of public dollars are spent each year in Massachusetts on homeless emergency services, investment in permanent solutions remains far too limited. Housing First programs in Massachusetts and across the country have proven to be more effective and cost less than historical responses to homelessness.

Housing First is based on the premise that individuals and families are more responsive to interventions and support once they are in permanent housing. Under the current system, getting families and individuals settled in permanent housing happens only after they have stabilized in a shelter program and have saved enough money to move.

Our current approach results in lengthy - and costly - shelter stays that often do not address the long-term needs of homeless people. The annual cost of a family shelter in Massachusetts is \$47,000, compared to an average \$2,222 per family for prevention and rapid re-housing costs.

A Housing First approach places individuals and families immediately into permanent housing with home-based support services. Case managers then help tenants access mainstream services such as job and life skills training and medical and mental health care. It is an innovative strategy that has worked in cities across the nation and is gaining momentum in Massachusetts.

We urge the state's lawmakers to develop a comprehensive housing plan that includes a Housing First perspective. The Legislature is faced with an opportunity to lead the commonwealth to a galaxy wherein homelessness as we know it no longer exists in Massachusetts. As the evidence suggests, we already know how to get there. It is a matter now of putting policies and programs in place to provide housing, first.

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