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Number of homeless families rises for 3d straight year in city

New census shows an increase of 17%

By David Abel, Globe Staff | January 5, 2008

For the third consecutive year, the number of homeless families in Boston has increased, city officials said yesterday.

In last month's annual census of the city's homeless population, city officials counted 3,084 people in homeless families, a 17 percent rise over 2006. There were 2,325 members of homeless families in 2005.

While the number of homeless individuals - those without families in tow - declined by nearly 5 percent, the city's overall homeless population rose to 6,091 people, or 4 percent more than in 2006.

In the last 15 years, the city's homeless population has increased by nearly 57 percent.

Mayor Thomas M. Menino and advocates for the homeless attributed the spike in homeless families to the high cost of housing and the lack of state and federal dollars to help those families.

"It is time for the federal government to recognize the growing crisis in family homelessness and to target more resources toward solutions," Menino said in a written statement, adding that the city lacks sufficient aid for rental assistance programs. "The federal government is leaving families behind."

Jim Greene, director of the city's Emergency Shelter Commission, added: "The housing picture for low-income families continues to be bleak without greater federal and state aid."

By yesterday, 37 families in the state were staying at motels because of a lack of space in family shelters, according to the Boston-based Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance. There is room for about 1,685 families in the state's family shelters.

"There's a crisis in housing in terms of accessibility and affordability, and that's driving the crisis in family homelessness," said Joe Finn, executive director of the Alliance. "Instead of directing all the resources to shelters, it's a shame that we can't figure out ways to use the resources to alleviate the housing crisis."

The good news, city officials said, was the 40 percent decline in the number of people they found on the streets during the Dec. 18 census, which the mayor took part in. But that number has varied considerably over the years and often depends on the weather.

They attributed the decline in the number of people on the street to the city's efforts to find them housing. They said more than 100 people defined as chronically homeless have been placed in housing in the past year.

"This census is a mixed picture once again," Menino said. "Our housing strategy has focused on moving elderly and disabled individuals from the streets into permanent housing. This demonstrates what I have always believed: Housing is the solution to homelessness." ■