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GLOBE EDITORIAL

Safe at home

CITIES AND towns need more relief from the pressures of battling homelessness.

In Plymouth, business owners are complaining about disruption by homeless people who congregate downtown. In Brockton, officials spent \$120,000 in the 2006-07 academic year to transport homeless children from shelters to schools. In Boston, people risk and sometimes lose their lives sleeping on brutally cold winter streets.

Homelessness hits some cities harder than others. When the state's welfare department looked at where homeless families had last resided from December 2006 to November 2007, the places mentioned the most were Boston, Springfield, Worcester, Lynn, Brockton, Lowell, and Holyoke.

Last week, Boston released its homeless census results. The count is 6,901, a 4 percent increase over last year. This includes a merciful 40 percent drop in people living on the street, but also a troubling 17 percent increase in homeless families.

Cities often battle homelessness in crisis mode, relying heavily on shelters. It is time to change, to slowly shift resources away from shelters and into permanent housing and services to help people rebuild their lives.

Boston is doing this, directing its outreach workers to help homeless people find homes as well as manage crises. A new city program has focused on the homeless who hang around the Boston Common, finding housing for nearly 20 of them. And through its homelessness clearinghouse, the city is connecting people to case management services. "The solution to homelessness isn't just housing, it's community," says Jim Greene, director of Boston's Emergency Shelter Commission.

Statewide, policy makers are also experimenting with "housing first," providing housing and supportive services. One example is the state-funded "Home and Healthy for Good" project, run by the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance. It has found homes for 85 percent of its 204 participants, and saved money. Under the program, the average cost of housing and services was \$24,300, significantly less than the \$30,000 it cost to provide services to people while they were homeless. One key savings: a big drop hospitalization costs.

Now the state should move past experiments and commit to long-term action. Progress is pending. This week, the state's commission to end homelessness is expected to release a report. We hope it will call for more housing and services. Job training programs should be ready to help people with spotty work histories. Public colleges should expand options for homeless students. And more doctors should be trained in how best to treat chronically homeless patients.

Rather than spending so heavily on a crisis that is decades old, Massachusetts should invest in housing solutions that help people, and communities, thrive. ■