

State proposes reorganization of agencies to aid homeless faster

By Milton J. Valencia

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Confronted with a growing number of homeless families across Massachusetts, state officials have proposed a reorganization of key state agencies that will help find homes faster so that the root causes of the problem can be addressed.

Using a so-called Housing First strategy, the state will merge the emergency shelter programs run by the state Department of Transitional Assistance with the housing programs run by the state Department of Housing and Community Development.

The Department of Transitional Assistance will still assist families with resources such as supplemental income and food stamps, and the Department of Housing and Community Development will use its network of affordable housing and subsidized-housing programs to get people out of emergency shelters and motels and into their own homes.

"The whole idea of Housing First is getting people settled in permanent, stable housing and then working on issues families are facing that caused them to be homeless in the first place," said Lieutenant Governor Timothy P. Murray, the state's chairman of the Interagency Council of Housing and Homelessness.

The proposal, which needs legislative approval, was made a day after Boston's annual Homeless Census showed that the number of families without a home has climbed for the fourth straight year, with children making up the fastest-growing group.

The Housing First strategy has been successful in helping chronically homeless adults, city and state officials have said.

And while the reasons for homelessness may be different with families and adults living on their own, the strategy has been to get them into a home first so that the causes can be addressed.

For adults, the cause could be mental illness, substance abuse, or disabilities.

For families, it could be a single parent losing a job or domestic violence.

"You can't treat those problems until you get a roof over your head," Murray said.

The proposal to merge the state agencies is the latest in the state's new strategy to address homelessness.

Last month, Murray announced an \$8 million plan to create eight regional homeless networks that will coordinate social services ranging from housing to drug addiction treatment to job training.

Lyndia Downie, president and executive director of the Pine Street Inn, a Boston homeless shelter, said yesterday that the state's announcement shows that the Housing First initiative, which has been in place in Boston to target individuals, is working.

Downie said the state and nonprofit groups need to do more to address the causes of homelessness before someone is out on the street.

Still, she said, the Housing First initiative has served as a safety net.

"I think everybody now understands that housing is the answer," she said.