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Tough test for homeless policy

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THE NUMBER of homeless families has surged to a record high in Massachusetts. Some 2,500 families are homeless, up from about 1,500 two years ago. And more than 600 homeless families are staying in motels, caring for children in rooms, often far from school, with little more than beds, a TV, and maybe a hotplate. Given the faltering economy, even more families could end up in shelters.

This renewed dependence on putting homeless families in temporary quarters represents a step backward for Massachusetts. Especially under the Patrick administration, the state had sought to end homelessness by 2013 by moving people out of shelters and toward the stability of economic self-sufficiency and permanent housing.

While the number of households falling into economic jeopardy will test the state's ability to handle each case in a comprehensive way, this far-reaching approach remains the best way to make sure families stay off the streets in the long term.

Shelter alone may not be enough to keep the homeless off the streets. What they may really need is help paying back rent, finding a new job, or getting treatment for an addiction. And families who are already in shelters need help moving out more quickly.

Fortunately, Massachusetts is still working on transforming its homelessness efforts to provide the "right resources to the right people at the right time," as the Massachusetts Commission to End Homelessness called for earlier this year. Armed with \$10 million in state funds, the state's Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness plans to start a sweeping experiment: Instead of automatic placement in shelters, homeless families will be able to get a personalized response to their problems. This might be a short shelter stay, but it might also be rent money or a referral for mental health counseling. Some of the interagency council's money will also fund job training.

State officials are looking for private funding to boost this effort, and they will track the outcomes and figure out how to expand the programs that work best.

"If we weren't doing this now, it would be worse," Robert Pulster, the interagency council's executive director, says of the state's homelessness problem.

For now, Massachusetts has to keep its shelters open, to cope with current housing emergencies. But over the next few years, some of the money that the state now spends on shelters should be shifted to programs that help people develop the skills to support themselves in permanent housing. The state's overburdened shelter system is a relic that has to give way to more modern and effective solutions.■

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