

Budget trims lead homeless shelters across Mass. to cut services and beds

By David Abel, Globe Staff | November 7, 2009

BUDGET CUT IMPACT

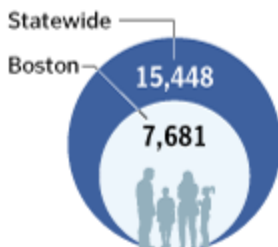
Number of state-funded shelter beds



Beds estimated to be lost statewide in budget cut

HOMELESS IN MASS.

Number of men, women, and children who were homeless last December:



SOURCE: Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance

JAMES ABUNDIS/GLOBE STAFF

Boston plans to eliminate nearly 20 percent of the beds at the city's largest homeless shelter, the first time it has made such cuts. Cape Cod's largest shelter expects to end its day program, meaning dozens of people are likely to spend their days wandering in the cold. Officials at the largest provider of homeless services in Western Massachusetts intend to cut their shelter's security detail.

The changes, fallout from the budget cuts announced last month by Governor Deval Patrick, have stirred outrage among advocates for the homeless who call them "unconscionable" and argue that the state's most vulnerable population has been singled out. The \$2.7 million in cuts account for less than 1 percent of the state's \$600 million budget shortfall, but advocates say the cuts will have a disproportionately deep impact on programs that operate on tight budgets.

"The money is spread so thinly already; I don't know how they can expect us to keep the amount of shelters we have now," said Joe Finn, executive director of the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, which represents 85 homeless programs around the state.

Finn predicted that about 500 beds, 17 percent of the 3,000 state-subsidized beds for homeless individuals in the state, will be eliminated.

"This is a tremendous setback to our plans to end homelessness in the state," Finn said. "We hope the state restores the money."

State housing officials said they recognize the cuts are painful but insist they are necessary.

"These are definitely happening," said Bob Pulster, associate director of the division of housing stabilization at the state Department of Housing and Community Development. "The administration has held homeless programs harmless in four rounds of budget cuts. The administration has made it a priority to end homelessness, but with the serious revenue shortfall that the state is facing, these cuts are necessary."

Pulster said the department, which oversees state aid to shelters, is still deciding how to apportion the cuts.

As a result, shelters are preparing for the worst. From Springfield to Hyannis, shelter officials said they expect the cuts will amount to a 15 percent reduction of their state funding for the balance of the fiscal year.

The pain will be felt most acutely in Boston, where more homeless people live than anywhere else in the state. In the most recent annual census of the city's homeless population, conducted last December, the city counted 7,681 men, women, and children who were homeless, an 11 percent increase over the previous year.

At the city's largest shelter, on Long Island, which is over capacity this year, officials are expecting to lose about \$350,000, on top of \$600,000 in budget cuts they have faced since 2008. They are now planning to cut about 100 of 577 beds and lay off at least five case managers or other employees, after eliminating 28 positions last year.

“These cuts are going to be really devastating to people who are already in real trouble,” said Carol Fabyan, codirector for homeless services of the Boston Public Health Commission, which runs the shelter on Long Island. “We’ve never cut beds before.”

At the St. Francis House in downtown Boston, which serves about 1,000 meals a day, officials are considering how to cope with what they expect will amount to about \$200,000 in cuts. They are looking at closing one day a week or ending their breakfast and clothing donation programs. The impending cuts come after the shelter lost about \$300,000 in state and federal funding last year and eliminated seven positions. The previous cuts were made to services that help the mentally ill and those recently released from prison.

They said any more staff cuts would jeopardize safety at a shelter that has experienced violence among its residents.

“I don’t know what the governor is supposed to do with a \$600 million budget shortfall, but I know what he shouldn’t do,” said Karen LaFrazia, executive director of the St. Francis House.

“People who have nothing - no roof over their heads, no clothes on their backs, and little hope of life being different - you don’t take away from those people,” LaFrazia said. “That is unconscionable and speaks of our values and what kind of society we are.”

Elsewhere in the area, the Boston Rescue Mission expects to lay off up to eight employees and cut the number of people it feeds and houses at its shelter on Kingston Street by 17 percent.

Officials at the First Church Shelter in Cambridge, which relies on students to help run its operation, plan to stop providing two meals a day and wonder how they will afford to pay for all the laundry they have to do.

“As it is now, we’re barely able to provide the services we do for people who come to see us,” said Jim Stewart, director of the First Church Shelter.

The cuts in Boston take place as efforts to reduce the number of people living on the streets have started to bear fruit.

While the number of homeless families continues to increase, the city has reduced the number of single homeless adults by 500 people, or nearly 30 percent, over the past five years by increasing the amount of subsidized housing.

City officials worry the budgets cuts will reverse the progress.

“The need for the safety net is real,” said Jim Greene, director of the city’s Emergency Shelter Commission. “Nobody wants to see homeless people fall back through the cracks we’ve worked so hard to close.”

There are similar concerns on Cape Cod, where the largest shelter provider expects to end its day programs, meaning about 35 people who stay at the NOAH Center in Hyannis will no longer have job training courses, mental health services, or a place to stay warm during the day.

In Springfield, the Friends of the Homeless, which has been building a new shelter for women, is stretched so thin that officials are considering cuts to weekend services and eliminating the police detail that ensures security at its shelter, where about 200 people stay every night.

“All these cuts are inhumane and an insult to the people being served,” said William J. Miller, executive director of Friends of the Homeless. “We can’t afford to cut these services now.”

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