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## **Reduction in homeless population lauded**

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**SPRINGFIELD** - A count of the city's homeless - those who live on the streets - last week showed a 39 percent reduction from a year ago, officials said this morning.

Geraldine McCaffery, Springfield Deputy Director of the Office of Housing, said the count, conducted by about 15 advocates for the homeless on the evening of Jan. 30 yielded 20 people living on the city streets.

"We are really making a dent in some of the hardest people to serve," McCaffery said.

A similar count conducted a year ago showed 33 homeless people living on city streets.

McCaffery said overall homelessness within the city, which includes both those on the streets and in shelters, has declined from 259 to 235 over the past year.

McCaffery, Mayor Domenic J. Sarno and others pegged the decline to the city's 10-year plan to end homelessness in the City of Homes.

It dovetails with the city's "Housing First" plan which offers through the Springfield Housing Authority to get the chronically homeless out of shelters and into rooms, apartments or efficiencies.

U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness Executive Director Philip F. Mangano said Springfield's efforts has become a model for other cities of its size across the nation in "reducing homelessness and combating homelessness on the streets."

Mangano, the homeless czar for the Bush Administration, said reducing the numbers of homeless here improves the quality of life for everyone in the city.

"I think it's part of the renaissance of Springfield," Mangano said.

The decline in homelessness was announced in the Sumner Avenue apartment of Claire Mendoza, a 53-year-old formerly homeless resident.

"Coffee's on!" Mendoza said with a welcoming smile as Sarno and Mangano walked through her door.

"We appreciate your warmth and hospitality," Sarno said.

Mendoza, who said she was "born in Holyoke and raised everywhere else," said her latest bout of homelessness started several years ago when she and her late husband, Richard Mendoza, were evicted from her Westfield apartment.

Mendoza said she readily agreed to host the slate of officials and accompanying media.

"I think it's important that (people) see that homeless people are not criminals," Mendoza said.

"This apartment is the perfect example of what Housing First does," said Robert J. Schwarz, executive vice president of Peter Pan Bus Lines and chairman of the Homes Within Reach 10-year Plan to End Homelessness.

Michaelann C. Bewsee, a board member of Arise for Social Justice said she believe the city is pursuing a good strategy.

"I wish that homeless people were more involved in both giving suggestions and helping to evaluate the progress of the planning.

Bewsee, who was not at the press conference, also wondered if decline could just be a statistical blip.

"It will be a temporary drop unless we can increase the stock of affordable housing and see an upturn in the economy," Bewsee said.

McCafferty said at the press conference however, that the annual survey has showed some 30 to 40 people living on city streets over the past four years. McCafferty said federal funds provide the tenant-based subsidies needed to provide housing to people like Mendoza.

Rent for Mendoza's apartment costs \$715 a month, McCafferty said. Mendoza's Social Security covers \$180 of her monthly rate.

McCafferty said studies show its far cheaper to provide housing for the homeless than it is to allow them to stay on the street.

That's because the homeless rely on hospital emergency departments to provide them with free care and sometimes require detoxification services or are sent to jail.

A recent study performed by Baystate Medical Center on ten homeless people who frequently require emergency room visits or are chronically ill showed each one tallied about \$100,000 in hospital costs alone.

"That's a million dollars for 10 people," McCafferty said.

Sarno described homelessness as a regional problem. Other communities have got to step up to the plate also," Sarno said.

In Westfield, Domus Inc. has been actively involved in creating housing for the homeless.