

My view: Regional effort can end homelessness on the North Shore

By Andrew Oliver

"Ending and preventing homelessness is possible."

No, those are not my words but the opening sentence in the recently published report of the Massachusetts Commission to End Homelessness (MCEH).

For years we at the Salem Mission have been arguing that the wrong debate has been taking place. Instead of how do we fund homeless shelters, the question should be: How do we end homelessness? For years we have been saying that the solution to homelessness is not shelters, but housing — housing and the provision of supportive services.

For years, homelessness has been allowed to continue because we, as a country, lacked the political will to end it. But no more, not here in Massachusetts.

The MCEH did not ask if homelessness could be ended; it set out to devise a plan to end homelessness. And as often happens in life, the right debate leads to the right answers.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the plan, apart from what may appear as the audacious statement that homelessness — for individuals, families and children — can be ended in five years, is the cost.

The key elements are the reallocation of the resources currently devoted to providing shelter beds to fund actual housing.

"Putting such supports in place will not cost the Commonwealth more money, in the long term, than it does to provide for the people currently in shelters and on the streets. Ending homelessness, therefore, is a rare opportunity where doing the right thing is also the most cost-effective solution," according to the MCEH.

Currently in Massachusetts, 80 percent of state resources to address family homelessness are allocated for emergency shelter and 20 percent for prevention.

In 2007, 5,000 families were in shelters at some point. The annual cost varies from \$11,550 for a family that uses a shelter transitionally to \$48,440 for longer stays. For individuals, the cost of a shelter bed is about \$1,000 per month. And as with families, a small percentage stay the longest.

In both family and individual cases, however, it is estimated that more than 50 percent of total resources are consumed by those who stay in shelters longer.

Housing First is a program that places chronically homeless people in permanent supportive housing and was first funded in the FY '07 state budget. At the end of 2007, a study by the [Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance](#) showed that more than 200 people had been placed through this program with an 85-percent retention rate. The average cost savings was estimated at more than \$9,300 per annum per person.

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Progress in Salem

Meanwhile, we have exciting news to report from the Salem Mission. We have been working very successfully with the Salem Police Department's Community Impact Unit (CIU), the state probation office and the Salem court clinician. This collaboration has been reaching out to the chronically homeless population who used the Mission's day services but were not willing to participate in the programs designed to help them, leading to a recurring cycle of disruption and demand on police, court and medical resources.

One way to measure the success of this collaboration is by the number of calls police receive for service at the Mission. In the three months from November 2007 to January 2008, the total number of calls was 47, just half the 93 calls in the same period a year ago.

Over the seven months from July 2007 to January 2008, a third of Mission residents were working, a third received Social Security disability payments, and a third had no source of income. The percentage working has remained consistent during that period even into the winter months.

Over the last two years, more than 50 individual residents from the Mission have moved into permanent housing and more than 70 have found employment.

We are excited by the progress we have made while also recognizing that we face many challenges ahead caused by a weakening economy, foreclosures and veterans returning from Iraq. Funding remains a major issue.

The operating costs of our new housing programs continue to rise at a much faster rate than does our public funding. The Salem Mission's ability to continue its successes depends upon the support and generosity of our donors.

Where do we go from here?

Financially, our goal is to complete our capital campaign (we have raised \$4.6 million of the \$5.5 million goal) and to increase our private, recurring funding for operating expenses. Secondly, we want to look at developing more low-income housing with the goal of starting to reduce the number of beds in the shelter. Thirdly, and in the long-term perhaps most importantly, we want to build a North Shore coalition, involving local and state politicians, chambers of commerce, hospitals, the United Way, the business community and others, to develop a regional plan to end homelessness.

As you read this article, please think of what you can do to help. Call your mayor or state representative and tell them now is the time to end the abomination of homelessness.

For years this country lacked the political will to end homelessness. But times have changed. We now have not only the opportunity to end homelessness, but a plan to do so. Let us seize this opportunity so that future generations do not look back and ask: "Why did they not deal with this in 2008 when they had the chance?"

Andrew Oliver chairs the board of the Salem Mission which operates a shelter and housing complex in downtown Salem.