

Tuesday, April 15, 2008

House budget to include \$10M for project to end homelessness

By Associated Press

BOSTON - House budget writers are backing a \$10 million infusion of cash for a project aimed at virtually eliminating homelessness in Massachusetts despite a looming \$1.3 billion budget shortfall and promises of cuts in other areas.

House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi has said he'll balance the House version of the state budget with a mix of cuts, money from the state's "rainy day" account and tax hikes, including the dollar-a-pack cigarette tax approved last week.

But the House version of the budget — set to be unveiled on Wednesday — will spare the new homelessness initiative being pushed by Gov. Deval Patrick and spearheaded by state Rep. Byron Rushing, a member of DiMasi's leadership team.

The goal of the program is to move homeless individuals and families out of shelters and into permanent housing as quickly as possible — and to prevent those at risk from slipping into homelessness.

Supporters defend the extra spending in a tight fiscal year, saying for a relatively small amount of money the state can transform the way it provides help to the homeless.

"We are shifting the policy goal to ending homelessness," said Rushing, D-Boston.

The state already spends \$120-\$160 million on shelter programs. Getting people out of shelters and into homes will cost about the same amount of money, according to Rushing, who said the \$10 million is needed to help make the shift.

Boston's Pine Street Inn is already working to move past the emergency shelter model.

People seeking shelter are now screened at the door to see if there's a way to get them into permanent housing immediately, either by getting them into a detox program or helping them obtain public assistance.

Last year about 7 percent of those turning up at the door were able to avoid the shelter, according to Pine Street President Lyndia Downie.

Pine Street also has two programs to help those already homeless obtain permanent housing.

The shelter has been leasing studio apartments and single rooms across the city and placing homeless people in them. The shelter is responsible for the lease, and works with the homeless individual to help them pay rent and get needed services. Nearly 60 individuals are currently in the program.

The shelter also owns other apartments throughout Boston and Brookline to provide homes for 470 former homeless people.

The programs have helped decrease the number of people living on the streets in Boston and could be used as models for other parts of the state, according to Downie.

"We need to look at things that are working and do more of them," Downie said.

Supporters say they understand skeptics who wonder why the state would spend more money on homelessness when there are so many different competing needs.

DiMasi spokesman David Guarino said the budget will also include plenty of cuts.

"We're going to be talking a lot about areas in state government where we are cutting back and making efficiencies, but this is one area where we think it's important to make a significant investment," he said.

Downie said the money would be well spent — and could end up saving the state more expenses in the future.

"If you don't start investing in a better system, you are just going to spend more of this money in the emergency rooms," she said.

A final hurdle is the Senate, which releases and debates its version of the state budget last. Rushing said the House is hoping to send a message by including the spending in its budget proposal.

"We want to go into the Senate debate with the Senate knowing this is a high priority for the House," he said.

About 24,000 individuals move through the state's system of homeless shelters each year. Of those, about 4,000 are considered chronically homeless and essentially use the shelters as permanent housing.

Another 10,500 families come through the system each year — about 30,000 or more individuals when adding in children.