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Down payment on a solution

GLOBE EDITORIAL

IT ALMOST sounds too obvious: Massachusetts could end homelessness just by getting people into homes. But this "housing first" approach is precisely what state officials could advance with a \$10 million appropriation in the House budget.

"I never say it's easy," Joe Finn says of finding housing for people who may have spent years living on the streets. But as executive director of the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, Finn says the emerging housing first approach is working across the state. His one big caveat: Housing isn't enough; people also need extensive services. That's what the \$10 million the House carried over from Governor Patrick's budget aims to provide.

In Boston, the Pine Street Inn is using state and federal money to provide housing, services, and a huge amount of patience to house and track 50 adults. Just over a year into the program, 91 percent of participants are still living in permanent housing. A comprehensive but flexible approach helps those with severe problems such as schizophrenia. Some are taking medication. Some aren't. Some will try but fail to kick alcohol and drug addictions. Some need help learning to use a washing machine. Some need to be talked into seeing a doctor for the first time in years.

Another crucial ingredient is a 24-hour presence, so that help is always only a phone call away. Pine Street has case managers with beepers says executive director Lyndia Downie, explaining the web of support. Massachusetts also has to help people leaving jails, foster care, and mental health programs find supportive housing so that they don't end up in homeless shelters.

With the additional \$10 million, Massachusetts could conduct more statewide experiments like the one at Pine Street. Instead of having to knock on 20 doors to cobble together services, homeless people could find help in one place. Behind the scenes would be regional coordinators stitching together state programs and local efforts to ensure that each homeless person gets seamless access to the most appropriate and effective services.

"Doing nothing will cost us even more," warns Lieutenant Governor Timothy Murray, pointing out that paying for homeless shelters costs more than helping people pay their rent. Murray is also chairman of the state's Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness, the entity that would deploy the \$10 million, and, he says, use the state money to attract private donations.

It's a tough budget year, but the Senate should also endorse this small, sound investment in helping vulnerable people by ending homelessness.■

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