



Housing, homeless, health

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While everyone is searching for a way to reduce health care costs, especially the state's growing Medicaid burden, one program has been able to do just that.

Housing First, as being practiced on a pilot basis here, takes some of the chronically homeless - those with underlying mental health and substance abuse issues - and finds them permanent shelter, a place to call their own. And, not surprisingly, their health care costs plummet.

The program, the brainchild of the Massachusetts Behavioral Health Partnership and the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, was the winner of this year's Pioneer Institute Better Government Competition.

"A growing body of evidence in the mental and public health literature shows dramatic improvement in health outcomes, residential stability and cost to society when homeless people receive supportive medical and case management services while living in permanent, affordable housing units," their report said.

Their study followed 96 participants (a total of about 400 are currently being served in the program, but some not for long enough to gather data on) and found that before housing their mean annual Medicaid cost was \$26,124 per tenant. After being placed in housing that figure dropped to \$8,500. Housing the estimated 3,000 chronically homeless in Massachusetts would, therefore, save the state about \$30 million a year.

The authors envision a future where shelters would serve only those with "temporary, short-term" needs.

"We see cost containment and better use of Medicaid resources as the first step toward permanently dismantling a shelter system that has managed homelessness instead of ending it."

This isn't pie-in-the-sky stuff. It's already working for some. But it does require the state to shift its priorities and purpose - a leap well worth taking.

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