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## A SOLUTION FOR HOMELESS

**E**VERYONE just drinks. You get up in the morning and start drinking till the night," a local woman explained about her life on the street as a homeless person. She started drinking as a teenager. She says she has been homeless on and off since 1990. Once she had nowhere to live, alcohol became a companion and a problem that led to cirrhosis of the liver.

Other homeless patients have "multiple chronic illnesses piled on top of each other," according to Dr. Jessie Gaeta: untreated diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. Disabilities like chronic lower back pain show up 20 years earlier among the homeless than in the general population, says Gaeta, who works for the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program. Some homeless people drink, use drugs, or struggle with mental illness. Many go to emergency rooms with expensive problems that require long hospital stays.

One cure is housing. Give diabetics a place to live and they have a refrigerator for their insulin and a place to cook meals that aren't loaded up with sugar, Gaeta says.

Senator Therese Murray agrees. A Plymouth Democrat and chairwoman of the Senate Ways and Means Committee, Murray shepherded \$600,000 into the Senate budget to run an experiment: Housing First. Take chronically homeless adults and put them into housing. They don't have to be sober, take medication, or work. They only have to

be willing tenants.

It's a powerful shift for the state, says Joe Finn, head of the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance: moving from managing homelessness with shelters to ending homelessness with housing.

The fear is that street dwellers can't cut it, that they won't stay in apartments, or that they'll destroy the apartment and harass neighbors. But a key ingredient in Housing First is services: case managers who help tenants with medical care, finances, substance abuse, and the daily challenges of keeping house.

Pilot programs around the state suggest that Housing First works.

The local woman who had struggled with alcohol stopped drinking in October. In December, she moved into Clarement House, run by Father Bill's Place in Quincy. She has her own room and shares kitchen and laundry space. And her cirrhosis is under control.

One happy ending isn't proof. So MHSA wants to use the proposed state funding to serve 144 people and collect data on what works. Housing First has succeeded in New York, San Francisco, and other cities. But it's wise to do a local study.

A Housing First project promises to lower healthcare costs, reduce homelessness, and improve lives. House negotiators would be wise to agree with the Senate and include the project in the state's final budget.