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BEYOND HOMELESSNESS

DUST IS SETTLING on the idea of homeless shelters. Some emergency beds will always be needed, but the goal should be to get people into permanent housing quickly, to save the homeless from the brutality of street life and make poverty less dangerous.

One tool that can help is the “housing first” concept. It can look like a bad quick fix: Just putting a homeless person in an apartment seems to sweep their problems under the rug. But the key ingredient is case managers who offer an array of services that lead to stability, and the beginnings of self-sufficiency.

Take Sammy, a Massachusetts resident. He has a drug habit, had lived on the streets for 14 years, and was “emaciated,” according to Gerard Desilets of the South Middlesex Opportunity Council, a nonprofit organization in Framingham. Last September, Sammy moved into an apartment, part of SMOC’s housing first program, funded by the state’s departments of welfare and mental health. It offers a powerful second chance.

Sammy now does laundry. He has a bathtub and a refrigerator. He goes to a health center, instead of the emergency room. And he’s volunteering and thinking about getting a job.

It’s a redemption story and an example of how to save money. Another example: Million Dollar Murray, a homeless Reno man. In February, Malcolm Gladwell wrote about him

in the *New Yorker*. His nickname is an estimate of the public dollars spent on him, including police pickups, emergency room care, and substance abuse treatment. The conclusion: It would have been cheaper to place Murray in an apartment.

Housing first is the future, says Beth Babcock, the new president of the Crittenton Women’s Union in Boston. Crittenton uses its influence to lease apartments, sparing families the 18 months of relentlessly submitting applications it can take to find a landlord willing to open the door to homeless renters.

“Cost-benefit analysis may be the new compassion,” says Philip Mangano, head of the federal Interagency Council on Homelessness. It’s a message he takes across the country to mayors and governors.

But expanding housing first means reaching “The Tipping Point” that Gladwell describes in his book of the same name — enough change in society’s thinking about homelessness to tip the balance into a whole new frame of reference.

It will also take a substantially larger investment from state and federal governments to create a national context for success. That includes money for affordable housing, social services, and job training.

End homelessness and the country will be a safer, more compassionate, more cost-effective place.