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Progress on the home front

A FINAL destination for too many homeless adults has been a patch of pavement. Now a report from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development shows a ground-breaking drop in the number of chronically homeless single adults, raising hope for lives that can seem unredeemingly broken.

The finding in HUD's third annual homeless assessment report to Congress is also accompanied by red flags, marking increases in some states, including Massachusetts. So while celebrating progress on the chronically homeless, the country must still do more.

From 2005 to 2007, HUD estimates that snapshots of the population of chronically homeless adults fell 30 percent, from 175,914 to 123,833. For the entire homeless population, including families, the decrease is 11.9 percent. HUD warns that strict yearly comparisons must be made with caution because reporting varies from year to year. Still, the data suggest heartening trends.

Help for single adults has come from increased federal spending on the chronically homeless and a commitment to housing first, which places people in housing and then provides supportive services such as help with mental illness and addictions.

It's a shift from "managing a crisis to ending a disgrace," says Philip Mangano, executive director of the federal Interagency Council on Homelessness, who points to city and state plans to end homelessness that leverage public and private resources and focus on what the homeless say they want.

But there's more progress to make.

Praising the decline in the number of chronically homeless adults, Julia Kehoe, the state's welfare commissioner says, "We can do that for all populations." Special attention must be brought to homeless families, who have caused the estimated number of homeless in Massachusetts to increase by 10.8 percent from 2006 to 2007.

Massachusetts is recreating its services to find better ways to prevent homelessness; to move homeless people out of shelters more quickly; and to guide people into programs that will increase their long-term economic stability. Armed with \$8.25 million from the state and \$1.75 million from MassHousing, the state's affordable housing bank, the state's interagency council on housing and homelessness will run pilot programs "to test innovative strategies, evaluate success, and ultimately make effective program redesign and policy changes," to end homelessness, according to Tina Brooks, the state's undersecretary of housing.

For years, compassion meant comforting the homeless. Now compassion, insight, and action are helping people find homes.■

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