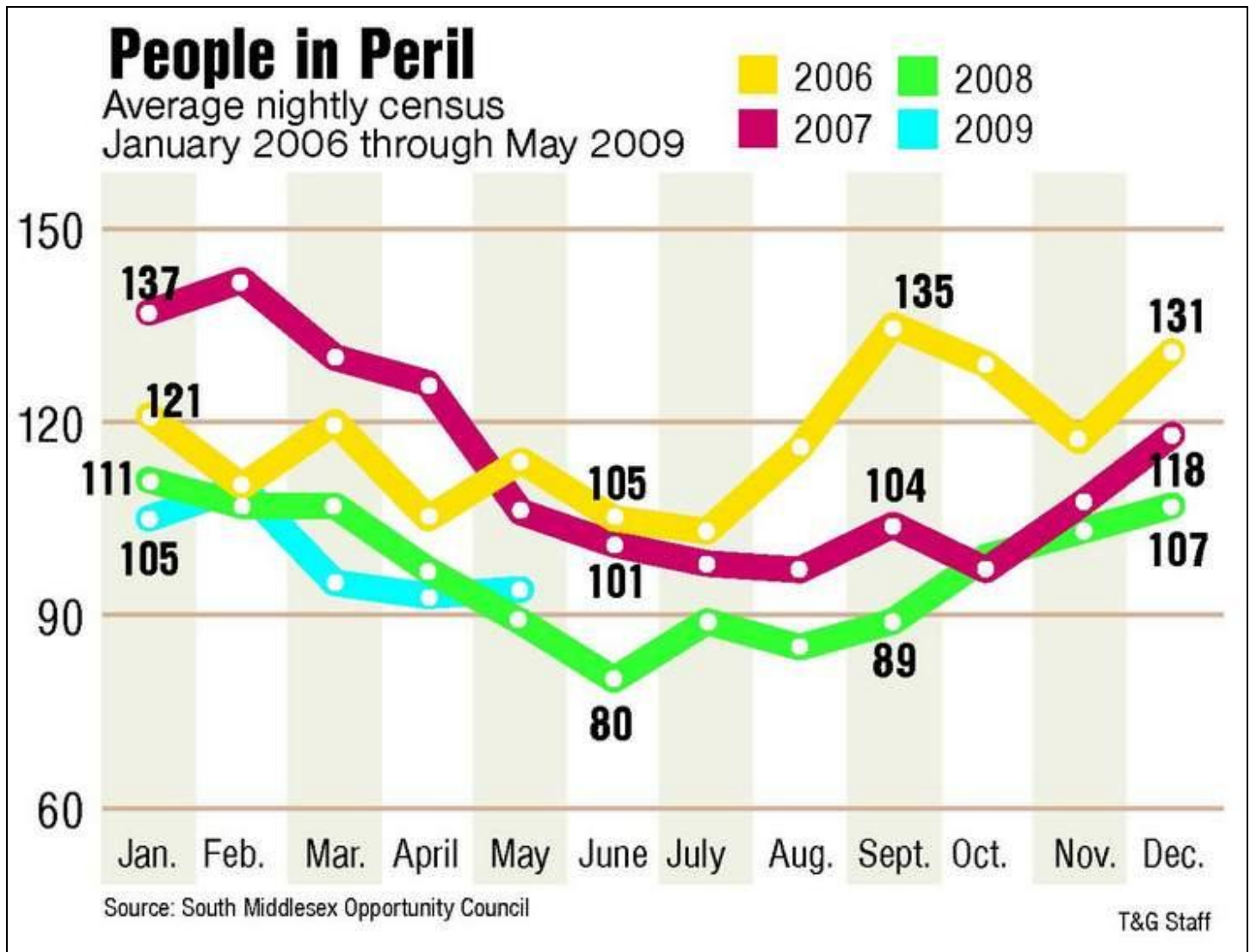


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Perilous story of PIP ending Of-exaggerated demise near

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WORCESTER — The People in Peril Shelter, long a target of ire in its 701 Main St. neighborhood, will close this fall, according to City Manager Michael V. O'Brien.

There is nothing new in announcing closing dates for the homeless shelter now operated by South Middlesex Opportunity Council. The city has been doing that for years and missing the target because no suitable alternative site could be found.

But this is a closing date — decommissioning, as Mr. O'Brien calls it — with a difference: an alternative has been planned and funding has been identified. The alternative is not another homeless shelter, the concept of which is now repudiated even by SMOC, the Framingham-based social service agency that operates it.

Instead, Mr. O'Brien said the PIP shelter that in the past has housed 200 people on the coldest winter nights would be replaced by a triage center of between 15 and 20 beds. The triage center is designed to keep people for no more than two days for evaluation before they are referred to other housing.

Most importantly, the triage center is part of a package of services and housing that will be paid for with \$1.9 million in federal stimulus emergency shelter grant money and \$900,000 from state Interagency Council on House and Homelessness funds. The grants are going to the Worcester County Regional Network for which the city acts as fiduciary agent, with Thomas Gregory, the city's new director of homelessness, taking the lead.

The \$2.8 million will enable the city to begin implementing the "Three Year Plan to End Homelessness in Worcester" released in 2007 by the City Manager's Task Force on Homelessness. The money will enable the city to make the triage center the sole entry point in the city for homelessness services. It will fund assessment, short-term rental subsidies with case management support and rapid re-housing for people who become homeless, employing the Housing First concept with wraparound services, according to the city manager.

In fact, Mr. O'Brien will miss the target of June 30 that he announced himself a year ago for closing the PIP shelter. That is because the shelter "does serve a very basic core need. We have to have a number of steps in place" before it can be closed, the city manager said.

He said he expects to award contracts for those services in August. He said he could not announce the location of the triage service because the contract has not been awarded yet.

While the city Web site says that the PIP will become a "closed-referral system" and "In 18 months PIP Shelter is closed," Mr. O'Brien said Wednesday that 18 months refers to the length of the ICHH grant. "I'm going to ensure by this fall we have indeed met that goal" of decommissioning PIP, he vowed.

One of the most fervent advocates over the years of closing the PIP, and a critic of the city administration for not moving more quickly, is William T. Breault, who is one of 15 members of the Leadership Council named by the city to guide the regional network. "June 30, that isn't going to happen.

"But I have confidence for the first time in 20 years that" the shelter will close within the next year," said Mr. Breault, who is chairman of the Main South Alliance for Public Safety. "For the first time there's money to implement the plan" and he gave Mr. O'Brien credit for making it happen.

Even if it takes another year to close PIP, "I'll not only be satisfied, I'll be thrilled."

The change in tone that accompanied the beginning of implementation of the task force plan that is designed to put the city, and not private social service agencies, in charge of planning homelessness services, extended to the City Council floor this week. Councilor-at-Large Gary Rosen took note of the anger that city councilors and neighborhood residents alike aimed at social service agencies placing homeless programs in neighborhoods.

SMOC renovated a run-down property at 2 June St. to operate a sober house there, Mr. Rosen said. Despite predictions that it would ruin the neighborhood, he said it has functioned so well that neighbors have been calling to ask when it will start operating even a year after it opened. He acknowledged that he was part of a passionate crowd of 320 at a June 2006 meeting at Temple Emanuel opposing the program.

"Let's as a community not all stand up in the future and say 'sure, in Worcester, Housing First, but not in my neighborhood.' " he said. "We can't do that any longer as leaders in the community.

"I was as guilty as anyone of doing it and I'll certainly watch my ways in the future to make sure we do have appropriate locations for people who will be leaving the PIP shelter and other" programs.

The regional network has designated \$300,000 or 16 percent of the federal stimulus grant for family homelessness and the rest for homeless individuals, dismaying social service advocates who point to the 27 percent increase in family homelessness in the county in the past year while individual homelessness dropped 12 percent. They said the city initially promised the 30 percent they asked for, but city officials said that had been an error and their final recommendation reflects the priorities of the City Manager's Task Force Report.

Grace Carmark, head of the Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance and a Leadership Council member, said, "I wouldn't have advocated for 30 percent (for families) if I felt that it would hinder our community's ability to move from the PIP shelter to a smaller assessment and triage model. We're optimistic that the next phase of this will incorporate addressing the growing number of homeless families in our community."

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