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THE NEW ABOLITIONISTS

JAMES CUDDY wants to end homelessness. So earlier this month, he shut down the Common Ground shelter in downtown Framingham — marking the beginning of a new policy era.

For years, people have walked past the homeless. Soup and blankets seemed like solutions to their problems. Emergency shelters became long-term camps for lone adults and troubled families. And these threadbare safety nets of last resort were grossly overcrowded. Complaints boiled: The homeless were an eyesore, a public safety threat, a nuisance even when they were trying to rebuild their lives. The Common Ground shelter drew such gripes in Framingham, even though it ran daytime programs to help clients find jobs and housing.

Now shelters are getting a far more important critique: that they don't solve the problem of homelessness. That's why Cuddy, head of the nonprofit South Middlesex Opportunity Council, closed Common Ground after 16 years in operation. The 29 clients have moved into homes. And SMOC is redirecting its resources to ending homelessness instead of just managing it.

Cuddy isn't alone. At a recent conference in Worcester, advocates, researchers, and government

officials agreed: the tools to end homelessness are at hand. A key strategy is scaling back emergency shelters and creating many more housing choices.

For years, advocates have played on opposing teams. One side helps families, pointing to the harm that homelessness does to children. The other side helps individual adults, arguing that it's hard to win sympathy and, in turn, public dollars to help mentally ill and substance-abusing adults. Now both sides have found common policy ground: housing first, a philosophy of quickly moving homeless people — whether families or individuals — into housing and then providing services to help stabilize them and keep them housed.

The underlying rationale is obvious: People function better in homes. It's easier to manage mental illness, hold down a job, or send children to school from a home of one's own than from a shelter. And housing people can be cheaper than keeping them in shelters where they burn through expensive services such as emergency room care.

Data drives these efforts, and one data guru is Dennis Culhane, a social welfare policy professor at the University of Pennsylvania. His research is a who's who of homelessness: a closer look at who is homeless, for how long, and what social services they use.

Early results from a study of homeless families in Massachusetts suggest that the state needs to do better at customizing services to individual needs, rather than just offering whatever generic services are available.

Take a single mother being pushed toward homelessness because of unpaid bills. What she needs is a grant to pay the bills, better money-management skills, a higher salary, and a place to go at the first sign of new financial problems. But there is no state Office of Bad Debt. And existing government programs can lack the flexibility to come up with effective solutions.

So that single mother could end up homeless. Then to get into a shelter she might give up her job because she earns too much to qualify for state-funded shelters. In other words, government might only help after a problem had grown into a crisis.

Fortunately, government is getting smarter. The state has programs that help people pay back rent and overdue utility bills to protect them from evictions — an inexpensive way to prevent homelessness. And, speaking at the conference, John Wagner, the state's welfare commissioner, said Culhane's work could prompt more change in Massachusetts.

Housing first is a vital solution. The premise is simple: put people into housing. Don't ask them to first get sober, find jobs, take medication, or become better parents. Just put them in housing and then offer a wide array of services. People may still have serious problems, but they'll make more progress in an apartment than they could on the streets or in a shelter.

But it's a challenge to sell this approach. The United States has a history of asking poor people to prove themselves deserving of help. Housing first is different. It requires a commitment to ending homelessness, whether or not one approves of the homeless. It means giving the "consumer" (a title that commands respect rather than pity) what they want, according to Sam Tsemberis, who runs Pathways to Housing, a housing-first program in New York City. It means letting those who try and fail to stay sober keep their homes, whether or not they have made a good-faith effort or shown remorse for relapsing. And it means conveying hope.

Affordable is a slippery term. In some cities, \$1,500 rents a house. In Boston, it opens the door to an apartment. But for very poor people, there's no difference between \$1,500 and \$5,000 rent: both are beyond reach. What's desperately needed is affordable housing for people with annual incomes of \$12,000 or less, far below Boston's federally measured median family income of \$84,100.

Housing people and stabilizing their lives are only a first step. Over the long term those who can should move into the workforce and up its ladders, earning incomes that help ward off poverty. Wagner points to the importance of workforce development to help people make economic progress.

The next governor should lead this fight. Massachusetts spends some \$250 million a year on homelessness, and the growing consensus is that this money could be used far more effectively.

The means and the political will have arrived. Now it's time to end homelessness.

**A new generation
of advocates is
pushing to end
homelessness, not
simply manage it.
That can mean
redirecting priorities
and closing the
shelters.**