

THE NORTH STAR

Volume 1, Issue 3

"Initiating Solutions to End Homelessness"

February 2006

CITY OF BOSTON ANNOUNCES RESULTS OF ONE-NIGHT COUNT

On December 19, 2005, the City of Boston counted 6,365 homeless men, women and children during its annual one-night census of homeless people, representing a 9% increase from the previous year. About 250 volunteers joined Mayor Thomas M. Menino to count the number of people living on the streets.

In conjunction with the City's count, the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance (MHSA) conducted a phone survey of state-funded shelters across the Commonwealth. MHSA found that shelters were operating at 124% of funded capacity that night, translating into a 700-bed gap between funded capacity and occupancy.

But the news came as no surprise.

"The fact is that our state-funded shelters have been overflowing for more than seven consecutive years," said MHSA Executive Director Joe Finn. "The good news, however, is that we have seen a leveling-off of those numbers and that we are actually starting to see a slight decline in shelter numbers. As we continue to gain momentum in housing—not simply sheltering—homeless individuals, I expect those numbers to decrease more rapidly."

During a press conference on January 23 at the Barbara McInnis House in Jamaica Plain, Mayor Menino reiterated his call for millions in unspent state funds appropriated last fall for Gulf Coast evacuees from Hurricane Katrina to be spent on housing programs for Boston's homeless. He also urged the

emergency funds for housing programs within the state.

"This legislation is consistent with the spirit of the original Katrina relief bill," Sen. Joyce said. "We took the goodwill that came from citizens across the Commonwealth in the aftermath of Katrina and redirected it towards our own needy."

The bill appropriates the estimated

\$12.5 million left from the Katrina fund towards local housing initiatives and homelessness prevention programs.

"As compelling as the situation of the Katrina survivors was, homelessness has been growing unabated throughout the Commonwealth of Massachusetts over the last twenty years," said Joe Finn, MHSA Executive Director. "This courageous legislation gives me hope

In Memory...

Homeless Memorial Service a Time of Remembrance, a Call for Change

On Wednesday, December 21, 2005, homeless people, service providers and advocates, clergy, and members of the social justice community gathered to commemorate the 101 women, children, and men who died in the past year in Massachusetts.

Participants gathered at Saint Francis House and marched to the State House for a reading of an open letter to state leaders that challenged the government to respond to citizens living and dying in the streets, public parks and emergency shelters and to use more of its resources to create long-term solutions to end homelessness. The presentation was followed by a memorial service at the Church on the Hill (Swedenborgian). The event was sponsored by the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless and the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance.

For 16 years, this Annual Interfaith Service has been a time to reflect upon the lives and fates of our homeless neighbors. Organized by faith-based groups, the service, which was attended by more than

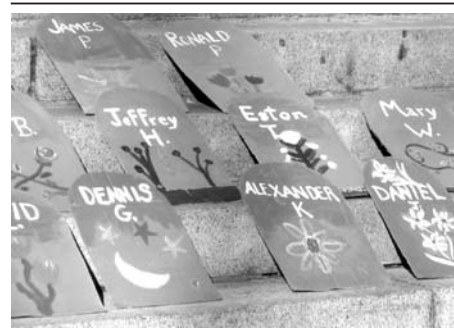
150 people, gave an opportunity to mourn homeless neighbors, point out the failure in putting an end to homelessness, and propose immediate and long-term solutions.

"Every religion holds in common a belief in the worth and dignity of persons," said Reverend G. Steven Ellis during the service. "When our

vulnerable brothers and sisters are dying on the streets from exposure or from illnesses exacerbated from homelessness, it is apparent that we are failing as a community."

Religious leaders from many faiths shared a sacred text or prayer from their tradition. Hand-painted tombstones each representing the dead were laid next to each pew in the sanctuary. In tribute, the names of each of the deceased were read aloud. Participants also gave testimony about friends who died without a home.

The memorial service was held in conjunction with hundreds of other memorial services across the country to participate in the Annual National Homeless Persons Memorial Day.



Senate Bill Targets Unspent Katrina Funds for Mass. Homeless

On January 10, Housing Committee chairs Sen. Brian A. Joyce and Rep. Kevin G. Honan approved legislation that calls for using unspent Katrina funds on ending homelessness in Massachusetts.

In September, the State Legislature passed a \$25 million bill to aid Katrina evacuees. A bill redrafted by the Committee appropriates the unused

Massachusetts Housing and
Shelter Alliance
5 Park Street
Boston, MA 02108

Mark Your Calendar...

Wednesday, May 10, 2006
Annual Spring Fund-raising Event
At the Omni Parker House
(For more information, call MHSA at 617.367.6447)



The Mission

MHSA is a public policy advocacy alliance with the singular mission of ending homelessness in the Commonwealth. Through strategic partnerships formed with government, private philanthropy, business leaders, homeless individuals, and service providers, MHSA works to ensure that homelessness does not become a permanent part of the social landscape.

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Today there is an unprecedented consensus on our shared capacity to end homelessness. State and local governments are taking an interagency approach to the problem, plans to end homelessness are being enacted, and corporate and community partners are joining forces to create systemic change.

Homelessness prevention and intervention efforts now focus on the integration of housing, employment, and support. Action can produce visible outcomes in Massachusetts.

Join us.

MHSA
5 Park Street
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Kaye Wild comes to MHSA from the Department of Social Services, where she was the Housing Coordinator for the Domestic Violence Unit, managing contracts and doing program development for state and federally funded domestic violence providers in Massachusetts. Prior to that, she was Assistant General Counsel at the Boston Housing Authority, working on contracts and real estate development projects. Kaye is a graduate of the University of Nebraska and Suffolk Law School. Originally from Nebraska, she has lived in New England for the past 20 years.



FACES of MHSA



Nia Higginbotham comes to MHSA with a background in the program, philanthropic and development fields. She has worked at various organizations such as Grantmakers for Children, Youth and Families, Friends of the Shattuck Shelter, the Hyams Foundation, the Girls Scouts of Delaware County, and the University of Pennsylvania. Nia is a graduate of Wellesley College and the Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning at Tufts University.

HOMELESSNESS, HEALTH AND HOUSING

Chronically homeless people, defined as those who have experienced repeated or extended stays of a year or more on the street or in temporary shelter, constitute about ten percent of the homeless population and have unique health vulnerabilities. This subset of people suffers from extraordinarily complex medical, mental, and addiction disabilities that are virtually impossible to manage in the setting of homelessness.

With an extreme level of disability, these individuals are among the highest-end utilizers of our state's health care systems. Recently collected data from clinicians at Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program has catalogued some of the medical needs and costs associated with living unsheltered on the streets. A cohort of 119 "rough sleepers" accounted for an astounding 18,384 emergency room visits and 871 medical hospitalizations over a five year period. The average annual health care cost for individuals living on the street was \$28,436, compared to \$6,056 for individuals in the cohort who obtained housing.

A growing body of evidence in mental and public health literature shows dramatic improvement in health outcomes, residential stability, and cost to society when formerly homeless people receive supportive medical and case management services while living in permanent, affordable housing units. This concept, linking health to housing, has become a focus of the MHSA advocacy agenda and is consistent with the recent goal put forth by the federal government of ending chronic homelessness in the next ten years.

Housing First represents a significant systems change in addressing the costly phenomenon of homelessness. This policy strategy anticipates better outcomes if

people are supported in a permanent, housed environment, rather than targeted for intensive services in shelters or streets. In this approach, housing is considered separately from treatment and services. Tenants live in leased, independent apartments that are integrated into the community and they continue to have access

to a broad range of comprehensive services with a "harm reduction" strategy, including medical and mental health care, substance abuse

treatment programs, case management, vocational training, and life skills. The use of these services, however, is not necessarily a condition of ongoing tenancy.

Until now, housing first approaches have not been based on a medical model, taking into account the specific medical needs of chronically ill homeless people. Permanent,

supportive housing promises to be the single most effective medical intervention to improve outcomes of chronic disease.

The strategy for successfully ending homelessness entails the provision of income and housing, coupled with necessary support services. For chronically homeless adults, the vast majority of whom suffer from disabling conditions, ending homelessness may be accomplished with a "prescription" that combines health care coverage with access to disability-based income (SSI/SSDI) and housing. These three components must be woven together in a well-supported, efficient, and intentionally constructed intersection to form a path that leads out of homelessness. In our view, access to quality health care is inseparable from the need for stable, permanent housing and a source of income. –

Dr. Jessie Gaeta, MHSA Physician Advocacy Fellow



POLICY WATCH

EVENTS MHSA CONFERENCE

The Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance held its tenth annual conference *Strategies for Hope: Ending Homelessness in Massachusetts* on October 14, 2005 at Bentley College in Waltham. More than 200 state officials, municipal leaders, philanthropists, social service providers, and concerned citizens gathered to discuss policy and practices aimed at ending homelessness in communities across the Commonwealth.

"I suppose, in the end, the ultimate choice in all the critical matters of our life is between hope and despair," said MHSA Executive Director Joe Finn during his opening remarks. "We can hope in the belief that

we can make a difference regarding the homeless men, women, and children in our community or we can share in the despair of a status quo that offers little more than a mass of porridge to the poor."

Lt. Governor Kerry Healey, who chairs the Massachusetts Interagency Council on Homelessness and Housing, gave the keynote address. During her speech, she outlined new housing initiatives put forward by the state and plans to reduce chronic homelessness in Massachusetts.

"We don't want people living in the shelter system year after year," she said.

Following the keynote address, three members of the Massachusetts Interagency Council on Homelessness and Housing participated in a panel discussion about chronic homelessness and what their respective agencies were doing collectively

and individually to prevent and end homelessness. Commissioners John Wagner, Department of Transitional Assistance, Elizabeth Childs, Department of Mental Health, and Kathleen Dennehy, Department of Correction, all spoke.

Diane Randall of the Partnership for Strong Communities was the luncheon speaker and discussed her organization's goal to create 10,000 new units of supportive housing in Connecticut in 10 years. She described the process of bringing together the key players and resources in order to create the political will to end homelessness.

The conference also included several breakout sessions that highlighted tools and programs that have

been successful in ending homelessness both in Massachusetts and across the country. The breakout sessions highlighted Housing First initiatives, homelessness data and research, prisoner reentry and public-private collaborations. State Representative Eugene L. O'Flaherty and members of the MHSA Re-entry Committee also conducted a panel discussion regarding CORI reform in Massachusetts.

"This conference gives us a chance to stop and think about what it's really going to take to end homelessness," Finn said. "Whether you're a service provider, an elected official, an agency head, or a regular citizen, you have to step back once in a while and realize that homelessness is solvable. The solution and tools to end homelessness are certainly available, now it's just a matter of conjuring up the political and moral will to use them."

A New Urgency Excerpts from Opening Remarks

By Joe Finn, MHSA Executive Director

This past August, we all witnessed the terrible consequences of total and cataclysmic system failure with the very serious tragedy of Hurricane Katrina. In both the preparation for and aftermath of the storm, failure across all systems was complete.

Administrative and regulatory systems failed. Emergency preparation systems failed. Public Safety systems failed. Emergency response systems failed. What set this tragedy apart was the rapidity: the immediate and complete breakdown of the systems necessary to ensure the public welfare of an entire community.

Since then, there has developed a new sense of urgency as the response builds to the dire need laid bare by Katrina and to address the failures that helped to exacerbate it. The circle

of response has widened to include the entire nation, as well it should. I mention this system failure, not out of any resentment of the focus or the resources the tragedy has drawn, but rather by analogy: MHSA has for the past decade pointed out to anyone who will listen that the homelessness in our nation is the direct result of system failure.

It is the failure of redevelopment that resulted in the wholesale destruction of critical housing niches. It is the failure to develop appropriate and adequate treatment and residential systems of care for the mentally ill within our communities. It is the failure of sentencing laws and corrections facilities that return convicts to the community without housing, employment or the resources to correct what led them to prison in the first

place. It is still the failure of regulatory and housing policy that fails to address the housing needs of the poorest of the poor. It is the failure of an emergency shelter system that cannot nor never was intended to meet the needs of the seriously disabled in our midst. And finally, it is a failure of us all who have allowed homelessness to grow unabated on the streets of our cities without any reflection upon both the fiscal, moral and quality of life impact that it has on the common good.

However, the system failure resulting in homelessness has not been instantaneous. Just the opposite, it has been thirty years of drift and devolution toward the chaos that now exists. Unfortunately, such a slow process has dampened any sense of urgency we might feel or that might generate the necessary attention for change. What is missing, unlike the Katrina tragedy is the appropriate sense of urgency.

We need, those of us who are serious about ending homelessness, to develop that new sense of urgency regarding homelessness in our local communities, our state, and our nation. We are armed with the data and information to date that show the tremendous cost this has on mortality, healthcare costs, corrections costs, public safety costs, transportation costs, shelter costs, insurance costs, never mind the ultimate cost to the human spirit. We have before us the technologies, housing strategies, service delivery models, all the things necessary to make a maximum step forward in ending our reliance on emergency resources. What we presently lack is the political wherewithal and sense of urgency necessary to move the solution forward.

First and foremost, we need a real plan, a business plan toward ending homelessness. Such a plan would identify the number of housing units necessary, the appropriate services necessary to support successful tenancies, the cost of both, and a reasonable timeline for implementation.

Second, to end homelessness we need the Legislature and the Executive branch of government to recognize the real urgency of homelessness and put aside any ideological or political differences to come up with a shared strategy and plan for ending the necessity of homelessness.

Third, we need the regulatory and funding authority anchored and supported within a responsible state interagency group with the muscle necessary to put resources on the ground and overcome the myriad of bureaucratic wrangling that often stands in the way of real change.

Fourth, it is inescapable when one considers what is necessary to end homelessness, we need the appropriate resources to achieve it. We need housing resources dedicated to the homeless poor. We must be willing to strike out in new directions and embrace new models for doing business if we are ever to move in a positive direction.