

By [Gerry Tuoti](#)

February 20, 2016 10:08PM

## Homeless advocates call for a change

Advocates for the homeless are calling for additional resources to help people break a cycle of poverty.

“I often feel like I’m offering people a treadmill to nowhere because it’s so difficult to help get them to a better place,” said Jim Stewart, director of First Church Shelter in Cambridge.

The high cost of housing, access to regular medical care and discrimination are among the challenges the homeless face in Massachusetts.

Often, the weather poses another threat.

During periods of extreme cold, space at emergency shelters often fills up, leaving many homeless people to sleep on the floor, sometimes without a blanket.

“Anyone who isn’t living in a bubble would have to say what we’re doing now is not working,” Stewart said. “We’re creating human warehouses and telling people they can stay in these internment camp conditions because we don’t want to commit the resources so people can get out of this situation and into a stable lifestyle.”

The Turning Point Shelter in Framingham saw several new faces last weekend with temperatures dropping below zero. Though the shelter is equipped with 18 beds, Director Chris Orcutt said the facility has cots and mattresses to ensure nobody is left out in the cold.

“We did have an increase in clients we’ve never seen or that had not been in the shelter in some time,” said Chris Orcutt, director of Turning Point. “We’re very flexible here.”

Orcutt said the shelter typically sees an influx of people during the winter, but that tapers off in the spring and summer when many camp out or find other arrangements.

Getting into a shelter in the first place is often a major challenge, said Kelly Turley, director of legislative advocacy for the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless.

To get into a family shelter, eligibility standards are so strict that 50 percent of homeless families are turned down on their first attempt, she said.

“Families are often required to have already stayed in a car, campground, emergency room, police station or other place not meant for human habitation,” Turley said.

To qualify for a shelter placement, a family must have a child under the age of 21, earn less than 115 percent of the federal poverty limit, be at extreme risk and be homeless as the result of a natural disaster or a no-fault eviction.

The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless is supporting an initiative to relax the admission standards for family shelters.

“If a family applies for shelter and is credible ... that family should be placed rather than exposed to risks,” Turley said.

Last March, Gov. Charlie Baker unveiled a \$20 million series of proposed reforms to reduce family homelessness in Massachusetts, including a plan to expedite the delivery of services, revise eligibility criteria for emergency assistance and increase funding for short-term housing assistance and mental health support for homeless families.

In October, Baker appointed Linn Torto as the executive director of the Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness, a state organization tasked with reviewing existing programs, recommending improvements and creating a strategic plan to prevent and end family and individual homelessness in Massachusetts. The council’s work includes preventative services, including increasing access to affordable housing, case management, job training, education and childcare.

The state provides funding to place homeless families in hotels and motels in addition to traditional shelters.

“The same is not true of individual shelters,” Turley said. “They will add on capacity in terms of cots and makeshift beds, but they’re not contracting to get hotel rooms. I know a number of shelters try to do as much as they can to make sure they get people inside, but it’s not necessarily with a bed.”

As most shelters have policies regarding substance abuse and behavior, it can be even more difficult for homeless people with drug addictions or severe mental health conditions to find refuge.

“Depending on the shelter, there are more challenges for individuals with mental health or substance abuse conditions,” Turley said. “But our sense is more leeway is granted in extreme weather conditions.”

A homeless bill of rights, an initiative from the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, is pending in the state Legislature. The bill would give the homeless the right to free movement in public places, freedom from discrimination in employment, the right to vote and other liberties.

For Stewart, spells of cold weather highlights the deficiencies in society's approach to homelessness. There must be, he said, a better way to connect homeless people to affordable housing and treatment when applicable.

"It seems public entities think this minimalist approach is OK without having dignified treatment or a path out of homelessness," he said. "We need to do better by our fellow citizens."

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