

State legislators, advocates push for more funding to help homeless

By Nick Neville, Boston University Statehouse Program

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BOSTON – With the number of homeless families in Massachusetts nearly doubling in the past 10 years, and chronic homelessness continuing to be an issue in cities including Worcester, legislators and advocates are calling for more state funding to assist those in need.

The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless held its annual advocacy at the Statehouse this week and voiced its support for a number of bills that have yet to be passed by the Legislature this session. The coalition also pushed for increased funding in the upcoming fiscal 2019 budget for the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition Program, Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled, and Children Program and the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program.

Kelly Turley, associate director of the coalition, believes that proposing level funding for these programs is unacceptable.

“We acknowledge that the state has had budget difficulties, but in a 40-billion-dollar state budget, these very modest recommended increases would make a world of difference for individuals and families and youth who are experiencing homelessness,” she said. “Those are investments that can and should be made.”

According to a 2017 Boston Foundation report, Massachusetts is one of just two states where more than half of the homeless population consists of families. To address this issue, one investment the coalition is calling for is an increase from \$15 million to \$18.5 million in next year’s budget in RAFT funding, which provides financial assistance to homeless families or those at risk of becoming homeless.

The coalition estimates that the \$3.5 million increase would allow the state to prevent homelessness for an estimated 5,686 households.

The coalition is also seeking to increase cash assistance to the disabled, homeless individuals older than 65 and children through the EAEDC program. Currently, homeless EAEDC participants have their grants reduced from \$303 per month to less than \$100.

A bill filed jointly by Rep. James O'Day, D-West Boylston, and Sen. Patricia Jehlen, D-Somerville, aims to ensure that homeless participants receive the full grant. Advocates argue that that number should rise to \$423 to match the grants provided to families with children under the Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children program.

"It just isn't an ample amount of funding," Mr. O'Day said. "I don't know what you can purchase with \$300 a month if you're an individual person – you can't rent an apartment for that."

Based on data from the state Department of Transitional Assistance, an estimated 551 households are affected by what the coalition calls the "homelessness penalty," and a \$1.5 million increase in funding would address the problem.

Ms. Turley said the coalition has worked "very closely" with Senate President Harriette L. Chandler, D-Worcester, Mr. O'Day and others to expand services for youth and young adults who are experiencing homelessness outside the custody of a parent or guardian.

Gov. Charlie Baker requested \$2 million for this line item in next year's budget, but the coalition is requesting \$4 million.

"As a result of some work that's been going on for the past six or seven years, we're finding that \$2 million is a good start, but it doesn't provide us with enough resources to really address the number of young people that are homeless," Mr. O'Day said.

After the governor proposed funding the Massachusetts Rental Voucher program at \$97.5 million next year, the coalition is advocating that it return to its peak funding at \$120 million. Ms. Chandler told advocates Tuesday that the Senate has indicated its support for this increase, as well as increased funding for RAFT and the Alternative Housing Voucher program.

Ms. Chandler, who said that this cause is "close to heart," filed legislation this session that would eliminate the \$25 fee to provide identification for homeless youth and families. The bill has been reported favorably from the Legislature's Committee on Transportation.

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Worcester County had the nation's ninth-highest number of homeless people in families with children. City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. hopes to address this issue with the newly-formed Task Force for Sustaining Housing First Solutions.

“Circumstances change, economies go up and down, things like the opioid epidemic happen and they can create kind of new spikes in homelessness,” he said. “And so we need to be as nimble as the problem is.”

Mr. Augustus noted that while the city plays a key role in coordinating a strategy, more supportive services from state and federal funds must be allocated to assist the homeless and an adequate housing stock must be provided.

“We know there’s not just one silver bullet or something that is a panacea,” Ms. Turley said.

In her remarks, Ms. Chandler said the Senate is prepared to take up a comprehensive housing bill, which would lower housing costs and institute zoning reform across the state, but that the House would likely take it up first.



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