

## Affordable homes and more jobs the key to helping homeless

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DANVERS — Four days before Christmas, Dorsey "DJ" Gustus received the call he'd been waiting four months to get: He and 5-year-old son Darnell were moving out of Motel 6 into permanent housing.

The state had found a low-income apartment for the homeless father, originally from North Carolina, and his son.

The Gustuses were one of thousands of families placed temporarily in motels across the state this year. And while they were lucky enough to find a permanent home, nearly a thousand more are still languishing in motels across the state. The question is what can be done about it.

Experts say affordable housing and more jobs are key to the overall solution.

"There's only so much efficiency you can wring out of the homeless system," said Nan Roman, president and CEO of National Alliance to End Homeless. "At some point, you have to look at the underlying costs. Basically, people need more inexpensive housing or their income needs to be higher. Those are the larger-picture solutions."

In essence, the state needs an adequate supply of affordable housing to help prevent homelessness in the first place, she said.

By law, Massachusetts guarantees shelter to every eligible homeless family, a generous stance shared only by New York City and Hennepin County, Minn. No other state offers a similar guarantee.

What that means is that when family shelters reach capacity, the state puts up families like the Gustuses in hotels and motels.

"I think this is manageable," state Rep. Ted Speliotis, D-Danvers, said of the shelter guarantee. "As long as we can manage it, and it's temporary in nature, I think it's the right thing to do."

There are some successes. The state has moved 800 families out of the system since Aug. 1, and 500 more left the system using other resources, said Robert Pulster of the state Department of Housing and Community Development.

"Unfortunately, as fast as they move out, they come in because of the bad economy," he said.

Some short-term solutions are already under way. The spigot will open on \$18.4 million in stimulus funds this month to help families leave motels across the state.

Housing agencies like the North Shore Community Action Programs and the Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership, infused with homelessness-prevention stimulus funds, have begun hiring and training workers to help motel families find permanent addresses.

MBHP is hiring six workers to help nearly 55 Danvers motel families who come from the agency's region, Executive Director Chris Norris said. NSCAP will hire one full-time employee to work with motel families from the North Shore.

"We're just looking at adding staff to help us ramp up some of this work," NSCAP Executive Director Beth Hogan said.

A year ago, the Patrick Administration committed \$8 million to form regional networks to attack the problem of homelessness. The networks have marching orders: Prevent homelessness and find permanent homes quickly for people who don't have them.

The federal dollars are on top of the \$91.6 million in emergency assistance for family shelters the state approved this fiscal year and an additional \$41.8 million in supplemental funds added in December.

Not enough affordable housing

In the long term, however, those who work on homelessness say a shortage of affordable housing has been a major obstacle to solving the problem.

"We need an adequate supply of housing that's affordable for families with the lowest income," Norris said.

But the state has no plan to increase its public housing stock, only to increase its capital improvement budget. The long waiting lists for public housing mean it's not a readily available resource for homeless families, Pulster said.

In Peabody, for example, the wait time for an apartment is five years, so long the list was closed in 2007, according to Peabody Housing Authority Acting Director Anne Marie Burns. For the housing authority's 137 family units, 517 people wait, she said.

Danvers has a waiting list 220 long for its 52 apartments. Middleton has 20 wait-listed for its four, two-bedroom units but is accepting applications for its eight, three-bedroom units.

Massachusetts owns about 50,000 public apartments run by local housing authorities, DHCD spokesman Phil Hailer said.

For 16 years, under previous administrations, the state lacked capital improvement dollars for public housing, he said.

"This administration has really stepped up to the plate to work on that," Hailer said.

In the past, more apartments were left unusable because the state didn't have the money for needed renovations, he said.

"There are more units back on-line that were off-line," Hailer said.

As the state grapples with an unprecedented homeless population, one thing it won't be doing is building more shelters. Pulster said that adds to the problem.

"We want to be sure we house people more cheaply and more compassionately in their own unit," he said.

The state spends \$3,000 a month to house a family in a shelter, a cost that reflects everything from paying staff to buying furniture. Motels cost about \$2,800 a month per family.

The state needs a comprehensive approach to affordable housing, Norris said. That should come in the form of long-term state and rental subsidies, and flexible short-term cash for families to get on their feet quickly, he said.

With the soft housing market, Roman said, Massachusetts could consider purchasing properties, even foreclosures, and returning them to the market as affordable.

"We need to focus on a solution of permanent housing, not big investments in temporary housing," she said.

There's a push nationally toward "rapid rehousing" because of its virtues to ensure kids are in school, health reasons and cost, Roman said. With so much money spent on hotels and motels, other solutions dry up.

"The most successful intervention is for very poor people who lack housing to get a housing subsidy," Roman said. "We don't have enough of those."

She said 80 percent of homeless families who find housing don't become homeless again.

"Once they leave, they never come back," Roman said.

Speliotis agreed.

"These families are hurting. Many of them lost their jobs, lost their homes to foreclosure," he said. "It's not a generational homeless family situation. This is a whole family that is all of a sudden caught, and there aren't shelters for these things."

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Photos



Dorsey and Darnell Gustus move their belongings out of Motel 6. They had been living in the motel since August and were placed in housing Dec. 21. Staff Photographer