

REGION

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## Nonprofits for homeless coalescing

### State grant encourages groups to work together

By John Laidler, Globe Correspondent | July 2, 2009

Area agencies are taking fresh aim at homelessness through a state initiative intended to bring new resources and more local collaboration to the issue.

The state last December awarded \$8 million to eight newly created regional pilot networks charged with working to end homelessness in Massachusetts by better coordinating and integrating services on the regional level.

Those networks - three of which serve the area north of Boston - have begun the collaborative process and are in the early stages of making use of their allotted funds.

"We know that homelessness has been on the increase for almost a year now," said Beth Hogan, executive director of North Shore Community Action Programs, a Peabody-based antipoverty agency. "This gives us an opportunity to increase our capacity to help prevent homelessness, particularly for families, and to rapidly rehouse people who have just become homeless."

Her agency and the Lynn Housing Authority and Neighborhood Development agency are co-convenors of the North Shore Housing Action Group, one of the regional pilot networks.

Chris Norris, executive director of the Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership, said better communication among agencies fighting homelessness "is going to be very beneficial to the clients we serve." He said it was exciting to see the homeless networks, first proposed by a commission at the end of 2007, get off the ground so fast.

His Boston-based agency is the convening agency for the Metro Boston Network to End Homelessness, the regional network for the area, encompassing 26 Greater Boston communities.

The Metro Boston Network, which was awarded \$1.18 million, has established a 50-member regional council made up of representatives of local agencies and officials. The group, chaired by Revere Mayor Thomas G. Ambrosino, held a community meeting in Revere on May 19 on homelessness.

The goal is to create a regional system that "is more easily accessible to the people needing help," said Laura Russell, coordinator of the Metro Boston Network. She said the network can also help prioritize at a time when the state's fiscal crisis is causing a reduction in funding in many regular housing programs.

Recently, the Metro Boston Network awarded \$470,000 to 12 agencies to carry out varied homelessness initiatives. It also set aside another \$465,729 in flexible emergency funds to be used for such purposes as helping families pay rental arrearages and to meet first and last months' rent.

Tri-City Community Action Program, of Malden, was awarded \$30,112 to partner with Eliot Community Human Services on an eviction-prevention program in Malden and Somerville district courts.

Philip Bronder-Giroux, Tri-City's executive director, said that through its legal services program, his agency has found that "certain people have mental health issues that lead them to fall into situations where they can't manage their tenancy."

"The new initiative will seek to address that problem through the hiring of a mental health clinician to offer counseling and referral services to clients who are receiving legal help from Tri-City's lawyers.

"In this really difficult [fiscal] climate, to be able to pilot something that we think is really innovative is particularly exciting to us," Bronder-Giroux said.

The Somerville Tenancy Preservation Collaborative, a group of five agencies, received \$50,000 to help families avoid

eviction and stabilize their housing situations.

The five agencies will work “to create a more effective kind of early-warning and early-intervention system ” for tenants of housing authority properties and other large subsidized rental housing properties who are believed to be at risk of losing their housing, said Danny LeBlanc, chief executive officer of Somerville Community Corp., one of the agencies.

Community Action Programs Inter-City, based in Chelsea, was awarded \$78,000. The agency will use \$44,000 to find housing for 60 families that are homeless or on the verge of eviction, in an effort to keep them out of shelters, said agency director Robert Repucci.

CAPIC also got \$23,000, which it has awarded through a subcontract to Malden-based Community Services Network to help stabilize housing situations of families facing homelessness.

“This is extremely helpful,” Repucci said, noting that “the \$44,000 will help save one of a number of positions that are scheduled for layoffs due to other state funding reductions.”

Housing Families, based in Malden, was awarded \$40,000 to work with the Everett and Malden housing authorities on eviction prevention.

Judy Perlman, the agency’s chief executive officer, said Housing Families would use the money to expand a pilot initiative in which the housing authorities refer to it tenants whom they believe may be at risk for becoming homeless. Housing Families then works closely with the family.

“We will reach out to engage them and try to figure out the what mix of support and skill-building it’s going to take to right that family’s ship,” Perlman said.

Hogan said the North Shore Housing Action Group, which was allotted \$686,448, is “very geared toward preventing people from becoming homeless.”

A focal point of that strategy is to create a simplified system that allows people in the region to access quickly the services they need to avoid becoming homeless. As part of that effort, the group has established three “access points where folks at risk of becoming homeless” can have their needs assessed and be referred to the appropriate services, Hogan said.

“I think we have a nice, streamlined, collaborative approach,” she said. ■

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