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Danvers sees dramatic drop in motel homeless

By *Ethan Forman*

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DANVERS — The number of homeless families living in motel rooms dropped dramatically during the school year after millions of dollars in federal stimulus money became available to subsidize rent for apartments.

After peaking at 140 families in October, the number was down to 31 as of June 15, according to the latest numbers from the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, which tracks them.

The Boston metropolitan area saw an infusion of \$44.5 million in federal stimulus money, said Phil Hailer, communications director for the state Department of Housing and Community Development. That money provides up to a \$1,000 monthly rent subsidy for one year, with families paying one-third of their income toward rent. It's far cheaper for the state to do this than pay \$75 a night for motel rooms.

"That is a huge commitment," said state Rep. Ted Speliotis, D-Danvers. "That is a permanent solution."

Meanwhile, the biggest financial impact on Danvers was in school transportation costs. The schools spent \$150,000 this academic year to transport students to schools in other cities and towns where they came from, Superintendent Lisa Dana said.

Federal law gives homeless students the right to be bused back to the school of their origin, or be transported back into a community after settling elsewhere, for the sake of continuity. The sending and receiving districts split the transportation costs.

School officials began to notice an influx of homeless students in the fall with the recession in full bloom. At the time, homeless families had overwhelmed the state's 2,000 shelter beds.

In the fall, Danvers became the temporary home to 138 homeless families, about 10 percent of the 1,077 living in motels statewide.

Statewide, the number of families living in motels has declined, Hailer said. There were 720 families in Bay State motels last week, he said.

In December, the town had 77 school-age homeless children — 35 attending Danvers schools and 42 who were transported to their home districts.

Recently, the state reported 11 school-age homeless children living in Danvers motels, with a total of 42 children in all. It was not clear how many of the homeless students were attending Danvers schools, but Dana said many returned to the schools where they came from.

"We still have roughly 100 people up there" living in motels, said Town Manager Wayne Marquis, who said the

decline was "a trend in the right direction."

The Days Inn on Endicott Street has the most families with 16, followed by the Knights Inn on Route 1 with 13, and Motel 6, also on Route 1, with two.

The state has not come up with aid to offset transportation costs.

"There is just no appetite in this market to create a new program, a new funding source," Speliotis said.

Reversing the trend

Beth Hogan, executive director of North Shore Community Action Programs, and Kara Ullestad, regional coordinator for the North Shore Housing Action Group, a regional network created to provide services to homeless families, said stimulus money and the rapid re-housing program have made a big difference. Collaboration with the Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership has allowed local agencies "to move those families more quickly," Hogan said, and create short-term subsidies.

Many families came from Lynn, Ullestad said, so that is where many have returned. Peabody and Salem also saw a fair number of families living in Danvers motels.

Once families find an apartment, local agencies help them stay in their new home. Agencies help families budget their finances, apply for long-term subsidized housing, find a job or child care, and provide other services.

"The first step is to get them into housing," Ullestad said, "but the stabilization process is very intense."

Those still living in the motels are receiving food deliveries from the Danvers food pantry, brought by local volunteers, Marquis said.

"People are out there doing whatever it takes to help," Marquis said.

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