

ADRIAN WALKER

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For shelter, a last resort

By Adrian Walker, Globe Columnist | December 7, 2007

About 50 homeless Massachusetts families spent Wednesday night in a place none of them belonged: in a motel, at state expense.

Thanks to a combination of housing woes and ineffective state policies, the dreaded motels have returned. The state's shelters for homeless families are overflowing, and affordable housing remains a scarcity.

The solution is a throwback to the 1990s, and it was a lousy idea then. Unfortunately, all the other options appear to be worse. So, the families are spending an average of seven nights in the motels - at just under \$100 a night - while they wait for shelter space to open up.

"I don't think anyone was interested in going back to using motels," said Mary Doyle of the Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership. "But there was no place else to go."

For a variety of reasons, the 1,800 spaces available for families in shelters have simply not been enough. Families turning to the state for assistance have found that there isn't much available.

Besides the motels, the state maintains a voucher program for families facing homelessness. Under the program, families pay a certain amount of their income for housing, while the state makes up the difference. That \$30 million program is not up to the demand, though. The amount the state spends on vouchers has actually been rising about \$2 million a year for the past few years. Family homelessness, however, is rising faster than that.

Government policy is to move families out of shelters, on the correct belief that shelters are no place for children to grow up. But the idea is to move them into permanent housing, not into a situation that is even more temporary.

"It's a crisis we're in now," said Juan Martinez, a state spokesman. "But it's not just Massachusetts. This isn't ideal; it's more of a last resort."

So far, the state has spent \$418,000 on the motel stays, a number likely to rise sharply in coming months. Already the fund for emergency shelter is running low.

Yvette Barr found out recently just how little the state can do to help a family facing homelessness.

When her 24-year-old daughter, Nina, spent six months fighting a recurrence of lymphoma, their resources were depleted in a hurry. They called their state senator, Thomas McGee Jr. of Lynn. He told them there was a voucher program, but no available vouchers, because the program was apparently tapped out.

Nina Barr moved from Massachusetts General Hospital to a nursing home in Lynn. But by the time she was healthy enough to return home to her mother and her infant daughter, there wasn't a home to return to. Her mother had been out of work for months caring for her daughter and granddaughter, and keeping up the rents on their two apartments had proved impossible.

They were lucky: They secured a voucher through MBHP and moved into an apartment in Marblehead. Had it not come through, they were headed for a shelter, of worse.

"The number one issue we face is people facing homelessness or struggling to find something affordable," McGee said yesterday. "There's not enough vouchers, and not enough affordable housing . . . It's been an ongoing problem."

With the state looking at a deficit estimated as high as \$1 billion, it isn't likely to be the solution to this problem.

"It's not good for families, and that's my major concern," said Dr. JudyAnn Bigby, the secretary of Health and Human Services. "It's another major representation of the need to address the homelessness issue in Massachusetts."

It is no one's fault that the shelter system is overburdened. But government has to do better than shipping families to motels because no one knows what to do with them. People in government always talk about helping homeless families get into permanent housing, but it takes more dollars, not just more meetings.

For Barr's family, the system eventually worked. "It was a very long road, but with a happy ending," she said.

Adrian Walker is a Globe columnist. He can be reached at walker@globe.com. ■

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