

GLOBE EDITORIAL

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Nests, and nest eggs

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AN OLD-FASHIONED approach to the homeless was merely to hand out soup, cots, and pity. Now a state commission has released a smart, new five-year plan to end homelessness.

"This is not a huge problem," says Representative Byron Rushing, a South End Democrat who cochaired the commission. Rather, Rushing says, it's a finite problem with a two-step solution. First, move people from shelters to homes. Second, help people keep their homes so that they don't refill the shelters.

To do this, Massachusetts needs more housing but also more roads to self-sufficiency. One promising proposal is "asset development" - helping even very poor people build wealth by maximizing their income, training opportunities, and financial literacy.

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development runs a program, including in Massachusetts, that helps people in subsidized housing find jobs that pay a living wage. Families also get a variety of services: child care, education, addiction counseling, and help saving money. Unfortunately, the program is so underused that the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a Washington think tank, has called it HUD's "best kept secret."

It's a powerful model for Massachusetts to build on. The state could add its own touches, such as linking up with local businesses to identify job vacancies. And, when appropriate, officials should strive to connect adults and children to mental health services to mitigate the trauma of homelessness.

This would mean that a homeless mother wouldn't just get a one-size-fits-all shelter bed; she would get help building enough economic muscle to protect her family in the future.

Elderly and disabled people who leave shelters might not be able to get jobs, but they can take steps - such as signing up for food stamps and health insurance - that will add stability to their lives. This approach is cost-effective because housing tends to be cheaper than shelter.

And there's no need for "new bureaucracies," according to Tina Brooks, the state's undersecretary of housing and the commission's other cochair. Faced with more than a \$1 billion budget deficit, state officials would do well to link people to existing resources, such as a medical imaging course at a local community college or a first-time homebuyer's course at a local nonprofit.

Next, the state's interagency council on housing and homelessness has to put the plan to work. Governor Patrick and the Legislature should provide funding. The commission is asking for \$10 million on top of the \$120 million the state spends on shelters. In part, this money will help ensure that housing and services are in place before the state decreases spending on shelter beds - the ultimate goal.

This approach to ending homelessness should bring a new era of personal prosperity. ■