

# Homelessness hits record high

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Advocates expect numbers to grow amid economic downturn and ask for state aid



Jonathan Santiago daydreams outside the House of Hope homeless shelter in Lowell, where he lives with his mother, Frances. (Ellen Harasimowicz for The Boston Globe/File 2008)

By Connie Paige

Globe Correspondent / October 6, 2008

Despite a pledge by Governor Deval Patrick to end homelessness, the number of homeless people in the state is at a record high and likely to rise because of the mortgage crisis and continuing surge in foreclosures.

With homeless shelters filled to capacity, more than 500 families across the Commonwealth are being put up in hotels and motels - a drastic increase from last year at this time, when 27 were housed in motels.

Advocates are asking the state to come up with emergency financial assistance to help the expected spike of additional homeless people make it through the winter.

"We don't want to turn people away in the winter, and we don't want to have people die outside," said John Yazwinski, executive director of Father Bills & MainSpring, a nonprofit organization that provides shelter for the homeless and affordable housing on the South Shore. "We're afraid we may not have the capacity to get everybody indoors."

Massachusetts has about 2,000 families and 2,900 individuals in shelters. That is an increase of 143 families and 93 individuals from last year at this time, according to the state Department of Transitional Assistance. Their average length of stay, as of August, was about 17 days.

Moreover, as of Sept. 29, 574 families that could not find shelter space were housed in hotels and motels in 18 communities across the Commonwealth, state tallies show. By contrast, there were 467 families in hotels and motels less than a month ago.

Among those communities with homeless put up in hotels and motels were Cambridge, with 71 at the Gateway Inn; Malden, with 56 at the Town Line Inn; Saugus, with 22 at the Colonial Traveler Motor Court; Somerset, with 10 at the Super 8 motel; and Worcester, with 76 at the Quality Inn and Suites. In Holyoke, 63 families were staying at the Economy Inn, Holiday Inn, and Super 8 Motel.

The state pays for those stays. But it costs less for the state to use the hotels and motels, at an average of \$85 per night per family, than shelters, at an average nightly rate of \$99, according to Juan Martinez, communications director for the Department of Health and Human Services.

But the placement can relocate families miles away from their former homes and disrupt their children's education, advocates say.

Under governor Mitt Romney's administration, the state moved homeless people out of hotels and motels, but last year the Patrick administration turned to them again because of the increase in homelessness.

Officials have been in "crisis mode" since the numbers of homeless increased dramatically, said Marilyn Anderson Chase, assistant secretary for children, youth, and families in the Executive Office of Health and Human Services.

"We all agree it's unfortunate that families, for whatever reason, are finding themselves in situations where they're having to turn to the state emergency shelter system for housing," Chase said. "We're doing all we can to accommodate the increase and, at the same time, identify permanent housing options for people."

Chase said although she cannot promise that more funding will be available, officials are trying to intervene by finding permanent housing for those in shelters and keeping families from becoming homeless.

In housing courts in Springfield and Holyoke, for example, officials are identifying people at risk of becoming homeless and helping those whom they deem responsible to pay back rent.

The budget this fiscal year for emergency assistance for the homeless is \$87 million, up from \$85.4 million last fiscal year. The Legislature also approved Patrick's request for

\$10 million to place homeless people in permanent housing as part of his pledge to end homelessness.

In Boston, the rise in homelessness has meant shelters are overflowing, said Jim Greene, director of the city's Emergency Shelter Commission.

"Over the past three years, family homeless numbers have increased by double-digit percentages," Greene said. "There are more families in hotels and motels. And for every family that makes it into hotels and motels, there are others struggling to hold their ground."

Greene said the commission does not perform a census of homeless in the city until December, but street workers have reported the numbers are growing. He also said a City Hall 24-hour hotline has been deluged with calls from people all over the state who have lost their homes and need a place to sleep.

The "double whammy" of the high cost of fuel and food "can put families at risk for homelessness that otherwise might not be," Greene said. "It's a very disconcerting time."

Likewise, on the South Shore, shelters are being swamped, Yazwinski said. Two shelters run by Father Bills in Quincy and Brockton have 25 percent more homeless people than at this time last year, he said.

On a night late last month, for example, 88 people slept on cots or on the floor, after 214 people sought shelter with only 126 beds available. He said 55 percent of the new intakes were coming from apartments they could no longer rent. "That got us very concerned," he said.

Last week, Yazwinski met with his board of directors to try to figure out ways to raise money to help an even larger expected influx of homeless get through the winter. Yazwinski said they are planning to approach churches for help, and ask the state for more emergency funding.

After the number of homeless spiked last September, the Patrick administration added 300 beds and family units in shelters, but predicting how much more shelter space might be needed is difficult. "It's always changing," Martinez said.

But the underlying problem is that not enough affordable housing exists for poor people, and the federal government is not providing enough rent assistance through vouchers, said Robyn D. Frost, executive director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless.

"There's not enough affordable housing in our state, and there's not enough vouchers in our nation," she said.

Public housing is also scarce. Many of the 19,666 people on the Boston Housing Authority's waiting list are homeless, said Communications Director Lydia Agro. Agro said the homeless are given a priority as apartments become available.

In Lowell, the numbers on the waiting list for public housing, at 4,800 at the beginning of last month, "just keep climbing," said Lowell Public Housing Program director William D. Sheehan.

Some see the crisis as a challenge to eradicate homelessness and the need for shelters. "I've never met a family that said a trip to the shelter is what I want," said Susanne Beaton, acting director of Boston's One Family Campaign.

Still, with some analysts predicting the economy could get worse, advocates for the homeless say they worry that the future could find even more people on the streets.

"If anything, we're going into a time of greater uncertainty," Frost said. "This is just the tip of the iceberg because a lot of people have yet to lose their housing. This issue is only going to get worse."

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