

Homeless put strain on schools

Influx of students a surprise to town

By Connie Paige, Globe Correspondent | September 21, 2008

Local officials are expressing frustration at an influx of homeless families whose children are now streaming into the local schools, adding unexpected costs to the cash-strapped system.

As of Tuesday, officials had registered 30 of the homeless students, and more were streaming through the schoolyard doors every day, prompting the superintendent to seek outside financial help.

"Our problem is we get no money from the state [for the homeless students], and beyond that we don't have a lot of space," Superintendent Donald R. Yeoman said last week. "We want to provide the best education we can for all kids. We will do that for these kids as well. We're just hoping there will be some financial relief."

Chelmsford is one of a number of catch-all communities statewide for the homeless, who are sent to hotels that have low occupancy rates and agree to take them, according to a state Department of Transitional Assistance spokeswoman. This fall's roster of homeless are also ending up in hotels and motels in Brockton, Danvers, Framingham, Haverhill, Malden, Salem, Northborough, and Somerset, and several communities in the western part of the state.

An unexpected flood of newcomers can keep any school superintendent up nights. Coming at the beginning of the academic year - when the budget is set, teachers hired, classrooms full, and school bus routes drawn - the sudden additions are a superintendent's worst nightmare. In this case, the newcomers present unique challenges that may need special - and expensive - services.

Yeoman said he got word about the placements in an e-mail from the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education just a few days before school was scheduled to start on Aug. 26. The e-mail explained that the Best Western in town was providing temporary housing for 48 families that did not fit in shelters around the state, he said. Later, more families housed at the local Radisson Hotel and Suites sought classrooms for their children. The two were the only hotels filling the need in the Lowell area.

The families, who qualified for state-supported shelter, were said to be coming from all over the state, and some from as far away as Georgia, Ohio, and Texas, Yeoman said. The state agency said more could come later, but did not specify how many, or when.

Paul E. Cohen, Chelmsford town manager, said he believes the e-mail to Yeoman was the only notice sent to the town, which must now scramble to find money to pay for all the additional

students.

By federal law, a community must educate homeless children and pay for their transportation to and from school, remedial education, and behavioral services, no matter when they come to a community.

For Yeoman, there is no question about responding. Beyond the law, the superintendent, a veteran educator who is starting his second year in Chelmsford, said he believes that every child deserves an education.

"We owe it to every child to make sure they're safe and to make sure they get the supports they need to not only come to school prepared, but to come to school and succeed at school," he said. "It's the right thing to do."

Still, doing the right thing is not always easy, particularly when finances are strained, as in Chelmsford.

Last April, voters defeated a \$2.8 million tax-levy override. That meant officials had to close the Westlands Elementary School, lay off teachers, institute new \$200-per-student bus fees, and hike athletic and activity fees, Yeoman said.

Today, the school system, which had about 5,460 students before the homeless arrived and a budget of \$45 million, has classes at all grade levels with more students than school policy allows. Yeoman said first-grade classes, supposed to have only 22 students, have as many as 25, while fourth-grade classes, capped at 25, have as many as 27 students. "It just keeps climbing," he said.

Yeoman said he hasn't figured out the extra costs for the homeless students. He said he is seeking help from the state education agency and state lawmakers in the district, as well as outside organizations. Although no one has come through with cash, two churches have agreed to try to provide clothing and other necessities for the children, he said.

Yeoman said that some local parents are reacting negatively to the situation. He described how one father, for example, complained about having to pay the bus fee, while the homeless students get to ride for free.

Meanwhile, the town is still struggling with its finances. A fire station has been closed, and three firefighters and two police officers have been laid off, Cohen said. Townspeople are discussing whether to split the tax rate so businesses pay more than residents. And municipal officials dread a snowy winter and the extra cost of salt to clear the roads.

Yeoman is resigned to his task of educating the homeless.

"It's difficult, but we'll just keep signing them up," he said. "They need to be in school."

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