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Lowell senator leads effort to build solutions for homelessness

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BOSTON -- As homeless shelters report overcrowding and an increasingly challenging population to serve, state lawmakers have advanced legislation to take a comprehensive look at the problem in Massachusetts.

The bill, co-sponsored by state Sen. Steve Panagiotakos would set up a special 27-member commission of various housing and homelessness experts to examine the state's homelessness population and create a plan to address the problem.

"If we can't end homelessness in Massachusetts, at least we can reduce it," said Panagiotakos, a Lowell Democrat. "This commission would at least allow us to get a handle on what the costs are, and take a look at the current system for providing homelessness services and come up with a plan to fix it."

The commission would draft a five-year comprehensive plan which would include recommendations on how many housing units and support systems, including health care, housing and job training, that would be required to get them back on their feet. It would also recommend steps to better coordinate community support services.

"It's almost like the elderly. If you keep people in their homes and provide services, that's much better than a nursing home. The same is true for a homeless person. If you can make them self-sufficient, that's much better than keeping them in a shelter," Panagiotakos said.

The commission would include six housing and homeless advocates appointed by the governor, five state representatives and five state senators, the heads of various state agencies, and three formerly homeless people.

The bill was enacted by both the House and Senate this week, and is now on Gov. Mitt Romney's desk.

Deborah Chausse, executive director of the House of Hope Shelter in Lowell, said forming the commission was a good idea, though the state already has an Inter-Agency Council on Homelessness and Housing. Also, Romney early in his term signed an executive order creating the Executive Commission to Improve Homeless Services Coordination.

"I am wondering what the tie-in will be with those agencies," Chausse said. "It would be nice for this commission to interface with those other agencies to do the fact-finding and research."

The House of Hope shelter is providing services to an increasingly complex population, according to Chausse.

"The families we see have more complicated needs. There are issues of education. Increasingly, the women we see are far from a high school diploma," Chausse said. "Many have substance abuse issues, mental health and depression problems."

Some of the mothers at the shelter are on a waiting list to receive day care vouchers, making it more difficult for them to work, Chausse said.

The state's lack of affordable housing and the costs of living compared to the minimum wage have exacerbated the homeless problem, Chausse said.

According to the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, at the start of 2004, there were 1,400 families per

night being sheltered by the state Department of Transitional Assistance at state-funded emergency shelters. That included 2,800 children.

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