

City begins 'multifaceted approach' to end homelessness

By MICHAEL LAFLEUR, Sun Staff
Lowell Sun

Article Last Updated:01/30/2007 11:38:04 AM EST

LOWELL -- Yesterday, Lowell took the first step toward ending what Philip Mangano terms "a moral and spiritual wrong," alleviating the plight of the hundreds of homeless individuals and families in the city.

"I believe that someday, you will tell your children and your grandchildren that, 'I was there on the day we decided we would end a moral and spiritual wrong,'" said Mangano, executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. "You'll someday remember that you were on the front lines of this effort, the moral and spiritual front lines and, we now understand, the economic front lines."

Mangano was speaking to an audience of more than 200 Lowell social-service agency heads and other civic leaders at the UMass Lowell Center for Family, Work and Community at the Wannalancit Mills. The occasion that brought him was the initiation of City Manager Bernie Lynch's efforts to craft a 10-year plan to end homelessness in Lowell.

In doing so, the Mill City will join hundreds of 10-year plan jurisdictions across the country, including such Massachusetts communities as Boston, Brockton, Cambridge, Fall River, Framingham, Lawrence, New Bedford and Quincy.

Lynch said Lowell's plan will take about six months to formulate.

He is in the process of organizing a 20-member executive advisory committee that will be drawn from the ranks of the academic, business and nonprofit worlds. Committee members will function with a "working group" of about 30 members made up of representatives from local homeless-service agencies, other social-service organizations and government entities to craft the 10-year plan to end homelessness.

The idea is to combine experienced homeless-service providers with input from people who have not traditionally been directly involved in the fight to end homelessness.

Yesterday's event featured a panel made up of the first five members of the advisory committee: UMass Lowell professor Robert Forrant, of the Department of Regional Economic and Social Development; Karen Frederick, executive director of Community Teamwork Inc., the region's largest nonprofit agency; Richard Jumpp, president of the board for the House of Hope's housing development arm; Michael Mahoney, an owner of Mahoney's Garden Centers; and Dr. Wayne Pasanen, Lowell General Hospital's vice president of medical affairs.

Lynch said he is still soliciting applicants for the remaining openings on the advisory committee. According to city literature, the committee will require a minimum commitment of 12 hours over the next six months.

The next step, Lynch said yesterday, will be the first meeting between members of the advisory committee and working groups, which is expected to be held in early March.

Work also is scheduled to begin today on city officials' 2007 count of the number of homeless individuals and families in Lowell, which is done every year.

"It's a multifaceted approach that's needed," Lynch said. "We can't just build more housing units. If we can address this problem, that's going to free up the resources we need to solve so many of the other issues before us."

Mangano said homelessness has been on the rise nationally for the past 20 years, but the city's numbers show that Lowell officials and agencies have had some success tackling the problem.

From 2004 to last year, the number of homeless individuals and families in the city dropped from 765 to 342.

In an interview after yesterday's meeting, Linda King, the city Division of Planning and Development's community development specialist, said part of that reduction is the result of federally mandated changes in "the way we do the count," but she said the city also has a number of successful homeless-to-housing programs.

"We're kind of eking away at this stuff," King said. "To end homelessness, that 400 units is still a lot of units, but it's doable."

Joe Tucker, executive director of the city's largest homeless shelter, the Lowell Transitional Living Center, said just working

toward the end of homelessness is a laudable goal.

"There'll always be some type of homeless issues out there, but my hope is we'll be able to respond to it faster, so people won't have to stay out there month after month after month," Tucker said. "Part of this is housing, and part of this is people being able to find work at a livable wage."

Michael Lafleur's e-mail address is mlafleur@lowellsun.com.