

Hotels providing temporary shelter, again

By Rita Savard, rsavard@lowellsun.com

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House of Hope residents Lakeenia Holmes, 19, left, and Ebuwa Omrogbe 25, are temporary residents of the Lowell shelter. SUN/BOB WHITAKER

CHELMSFORD -- Everything Ebuwa Omrogbe owned fit into two bags.

Clothes. Shampoo. A picture of family.

Standing in the doorway of a motel room, she looked from the bed to the view of a city street outside her small window. This was rock bottom.

"How did I get here?" she wondered.

A woman with a college degree and a full-time job isn't supposed to wind up on the streets.

After the bank foreclosed on the house she was living in, Omrogbe's life quickly unraveled. With no money to put down on a new apartment, and nowhere to go, the 25-year-old went to the state for help and was immediately placed in a motel.

Every shelter in Massachusetts is filled to capacity, so the state reinstated its hotel/motel program to provide temporary emergency shelter to homeless families. According to the state Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), more than 2,400 homeless families are staying in shelters across the state, and another 2,900 beds for homeless individuals that are filled on any given night.

The numbers show homelessness hitting a record high in Massachusetts, as tough economic times paint a startling picture about the new face of poverty.

"With unemployment and foreclosures rising, there are a growing number of working, middle-class families and individuals struggling to find affordable housing," said Sue Beaton, interim director of the nonprofit One Family Campaign in Boston. "The majority of state money for emergency transition assistance is spent keeping the homeless in shelters and motels. Keeping families housed is much less expensive than either placing them in motels or shelters, but until the legislation is changed our hands are basically tied."

As of Tuesday, 532 families lived in hotels.

"Keep in mind that this number captures a moment in time," DTA spokesman Juan Martinez said. "Each day, we work to move families out of motels and into shelters or, ideally, permanent housing."

But homeless advocates say the shortage of affordable housing is a glaring problem. The current waiting list is thousands deep.

In Lowell, nearly 4,000 families are on waiting lists for various affordable housing, said Gary Wallace, executive director of the Housing Authority.

"This situation really leaves a person in crisis to figure out the whole road map by themselves," Beaton said. "And sending them to a shelter while they wait forever for affordable housing is actually the most expensive way to handle the crisis for the family and the taxpayer. We need a better solution to fix the homelessness, instead of just slapping an expensive Band-Aid over it."

This year the state has budgeted \$87 million for emergency transition assistance, enough to place 5,000 families in shelters and motels.

Beacon Hill lawmakers have earmarked \$10 million to be distributed among six communities in Massachusetts that will ultimately go to the six that present the best ideas for ending homelessness.

State Sen. Steve Panagiotakos said the program is a pilot effort designed to create real solutions.

"We're trying to give people the means to keep families from becoming homeless," Panagiotakos said. "We're not going to get to zero right away, but this is an important first step."

Beaton said the SHIFT Coalition is an example of how offering a little money can go a long way in keeping families off the street.

From April 2005 to July 2006, SHIFT spent \$28,000 to help 25 area people avoid shelters.

"Sometimes it can be as little as a few hundred dollars to fix someone's car so they can get to their job, paying an overdue utility bill, or coming up with last month's rent and a security deposit so they can move into an apartment," said Brent Rourke, Lowell's SHIFT coordinator.

The question that needs to be answered, Rourke said, is "How can we do better with the resources that the Commonwealth has to spend?"

Some families have lived in shelters for up to two years while they waited for affordable housing, Beaton said.

In August, homeless families spent an average of 17 days in hotels, averaging \$85 per night, Martinez said.

Eighteen cities and towns across the state house families in local motels, including two in Chelmsford.

Omrogbe was moved out of a hotel to shelter at Lowell's House of Hope in June. She was working full-time and attending college classes to earn her second degree. Two weeks ago, she had to take a leave of absence from work, because she is expecting to deliver a baby boy any day.

She said she wouldn't have ended up homeless, if she had just had money for another apartment. With the baby coming, she said she prays that there is affordable housing available for her soon.

"You hear stories about some people waiting four, or even eight years for an affordable apartment," Omrogbe said. "I think I'm sixty-something on the waiting list, but you never know. Things happen in life and suddenly you end up back at square one, starting over from scratch."