

## Change in tactics urged on homelessness



Allan Jung/for Daily News and Wicked Local

**Dennis P. Culhane, Professor of Social Policy at University of Pennsylvania addresses the room at a conference on ending homelessness in Massachusetts.**

**By Kendall Hatch/Daily News staff**

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FRAMINGHAM —

Every day, families across the state return to homes that aren't theirs.

Many are a few short steps or a few paychecks away from being able to hold their own set of keys to a permanent house, but are unable to dig themselves out of the perpetuity of life in a shelter or hotel without a little help.

Now, those involved in the fight against homelessness are pushing for a change in the Emergency Assistance Program to put more resources toward finding solutions for families on the fringe.

"If the shelters are our safety net, that safety net is as good as lying on the ground," said Dennis Culhane yesterday during a forum on ending homelessness in Massachusetts. "We are catching them too late."

Culhane, author of a study titled "Ending Family Homelessness in Massachusetts: A New Approach for the Emergency Assistance Program," spoke at a forum presented by the MetroWest Network to End Homelessness. The study was funded by the Paul and Phyllis Fireman Charitable Foundation.

Culhane said too much of the cash pumped into the Emergency Assistance Program is tied up in paying for emergency shelters.

Instead, he said, more resources should be put toward promoting self-sufficiency through housing stabilization.

Providing families with a permanent place to stay and some seed money to help them gain footing is more effective and cheaper than keeping families in shelters or putting them up in hotels, Culhane said.

The cost of putting a family up in a hotel for a month is about \$2,250, said Paul Mina, president of the United Way of Tri-County. Putting the same family in permanent housing would cost slightly upward of \$800, he said.

Saving money on emergency shelters would free up money for homelessness prevention, diversion and housing stabilization, Culhane said.

United Way of Tri-County is the convening agency for the MetroWest Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness, one of 10 regional pilot networks in the state.

The MetroWest network, funded by the Fireman Foundation, has already been making strides in dealing with family homelessness, said Tina Close, director of Family Emergency Services at the South Middlesex Opportunity Council.

SMOC took on a diversion specialist in October, who has since placed 28 families in permanent housing through the diversion program.

The number of families in MetroWest staying in hotels as shelters overflow has dropped sharply, she said.

Close said last Friday, only three MetroWest families were staying in hotels and 106 were staying in shelters.

Last summer, she said, there would be times when up to 20 families were being placed in hotels.

The funding for the MetroWest network, however, runs out this fall and officials are looking for ways to continue the program.

The creation of the state Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness and the 10 regional networks, a reworking of the state's contracts with family shelter providers and \$44.5 million in funding from the federal Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program puts Massachusetts in a favorable position to overhaul how it handles family homelessness, said Culhane.

"This state is in a far better place to move forward with this than anywhere else in the country," he said.

He said the next step is to gather leaders in the fight against family homelessness and talk about how to move forward, as well as urging lawmakers to take steps toward a readjustment of the Emergency Assistance Program.

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