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Amid controversy, efforts to help homeless continue

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Affordable housing options a priority

Under the trees of the Hyannis village green one sunny afternoon this week, a man was arguing loudly with someone.

“That’s my blanket!” he shouted. “She gave it to me.”

A crowd looked on, some of them yelling encouragement, as a passerby called the police business line to ask if an officer could intervene.

Elsewhere in town, the arguments about homelessness were less physical but no less intense. Housing Assistance Corporation was rallying the troops to keep the Noah Shelter on Winter Street, as business owners and residents reviewed strategies with town officials for reducing the 60-bed shelter to a smaller emergency facility or removing it entirely from Hyannis, an outcome they say has been achieved elsewhere in the state.

Far away from downtown, at the county complex, county commissioner Sheila Lyons and housing advocate Bob Murray, co-chairs of the Islands Regional Network to End Homelessness, announced a new Regional Network Housing Committee.

“In light of the recent public controversy concerning the ongoing need to provide shelter to Cape Cod’s homeless population, the availability of permanent, stable homes for those individuals, and all who are homeless or at risk, continues to be a pressing issue,” they said in a press statement.

The heat and light of the controversy seemed muted June 18 in the leafy backyard of HAC’s Angel House in Hyannis, where Susanne Beaton of the Fireman Charitable Foundation spoke of an opportunity to help homeless families and families in danger of becoming homeless to avoid lengthy shelter stays. That would require legislation to allow Emergency Assistance funds to go into such programs and not principally to shelters.

Housing Assistance Corporation does more than run the Noah Shelter. Angel House is one of its four family shelters that help people get back on their feet and find permanent housing and employment while receiving needed services. But

according to Allison Rice, HAC's vice president of program operations, some of the agency's successes involve people who never stay in shelters.

Prevention programs, supported by funds raised by private partners like the Dennis-Yarmouth Ecumenical Council for the Homeless, are so much more effective than extended shelter stays, Beaton and Rice agreed. Two heads of households who were on the brink came to HAC and secured housing through the agency – one in Osterville. Both told their stories during last week's meeting at Angel House.

If housing is the question, there was an answer this week from the federal and state government. HAC won approval to use more than \$4 million in tax credits and program subsidies to create 45 affordable rental units in Bourne.