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Veteran and Chronic Homelessness Declines; Leaders Gather for Next Steps, New Strategies

Greenfield, MA – Over 150 leaders from across the four Western Massachusetts counties came together today to combat homelessness in the region and to learn from a newly released report by the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness.

In a packed room at Greenfield Community College, a dozen state legislators, including the five just elected from the Upper Pioneer Valley, two sheriffs, 7 mayors, 2 town administrators, 8 housing authorities, state agency leaders, every community college, career center and major hospital in each county, and over 100 others across every sector showed up to find out what it will take to prevent and end homelessness in Western Massachusetts.

“Today our region made an extraordinary demonstration of its commitment to end homelessness,” said Pamela Schwartz, director of the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness. “And today our Network shared some vital tools that will bring us all closer to making that goal a reality.”

The report found that since 2012:

- Chronic homelessness declined 38 per cent
- Veteran homelessness declined 24 per cent
- Family homelessness remained level

The report also showed that as of the “Point-in-Time” Count in January 2018, 2,899 people were homeless in Western Massachusetts, with ___% of that total constituting families living in shelter.

“We have lessons learned from our progress in reducing individual homelessness that we shared today because we know if we can expand those practices, we can re-house more individuals and families,” said Gerry McCafferty, author of the report and Director of the Office of Housing for the City of Springfield [and liaison to the Hampden County Continuum of Care. – include?]

The proposed strategies include:

- Working with housing authorities to support their acquisition of newly available HUD housing vouchers that can be utilized to house chronically homeless individuals;
- Building partnerships with hospitals, sheriff and police departments to implement a “coordinated entry” system that maximizes identification and prioritization of housing crisis to ensure the most effective intervention in the shortest time possible;

- Expanding successful youth programs to address the prevalence of homelessness among young adults ages 18-24, especially LGBTQ youth. 49 per cent of Massachusetts community college students experience housing insecurity; 44 per cent of young adults who experience homelessness have been in the juvenile justice system or jail.
- Increasing re-housing resources to families in domestic violence shelters in order to make permanent housing possible and create space at these shelters for crisis situations. Massachusetts domestic violence shelters must turn away up to 85 per cent of hotline requests for shelter due to lack of capacity.

“We know it takes a multi-pronged approach to tackle this challenge,” said Clare Higgins, executive director of Community Action of Pioneer Valley. “And while we improve our local systems, we also know we need the investment in our state systems such as affordable housing, child care, public transportation, job training and education, to make permanent housing a lasting reality.”

The report also highlighted the cost of shelter in contrast to prevention. The Fiscal Year 2018 prevention cost per family through the state’s RAFT program is on average \$3,874 while the average cost of shelter per family in the same year was \$42,845.

“Prevention saves money, provides stability and spares children and adults the trauma of homelessness,” noted Brad Gordon, Executive Director of Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority. “We have multiple statewide prevention programs that are proven successes; we just need the political will to grow them to prevent more homelessness.”

The Network presentation defined the goal of ending homelessness based on a nationally adopted framework in which homelessness becomes “rare, brief and non-recurring.” This framework includes a “Housing First” approach which re-houses people as quickly as possible, in conjunction with appropriate support services, to help the individual or family stay stably housed.

“We know this model works,” Schwartz said. “Today was a big step forward to help us do even better when we get to work tomorrow.”

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