



Leading the Way III

Beyond Shelter: Boston's Strategy to Reduce Homelessness

Executive Summary

In March of 2009, the City of Boston announced its *Leading the Way III* policy, a comprehensive housing strategy to be enacted through 2012. One of the key goals of this new policy was an expanded commitment to homeless Bostonians, with a joint focus on total elimination of long-term individual homelessness, as well as a 50% reduction of family homelessness.

While that new policy outlined the basic elements of how Boston would achieve those goals, it did not specify details or resources, preferring to defer those decisions until the Boston Regional Network Leadership Council had finalized its recommendations in the summer of 2009. The incorporation of those recommendations into the goals already established by *Leading the Way III* are detailed in the document *Beyond Shelter: Boston's Strategy to Reduce Homelessness*, which is summarized below.

HOMELESSNESS IN BOSTON: RECENT TRENDS

Homeless Individuals. While the number of homeless individuals has been relatively level at between 3,700-4,000 people for the last fifteen years, data analysis shows that at a point in time in 2009, approximately 15% of those individuals remained in Boston's shelter system for more than a year. Shelter stays of this duration were never planned for; the adult shelter system was designed to house people in short-term or emergency situations. This unintended use of the shelter system is extraordinarily cost-ineffective and ill-suited to solve the long-term housing needs of chronically homeless individuals. It also has a direct impact on the system's ability to provide services to all those in need; current estimates number 560 persons from Boston in this long-term category, and notes that they use nearly 50% of Boston's shelter beds.

Family Homelessness. After having remained relatively unchanged since 1994, the rate of family homelessness began to show significant increases in 2005 and 2006. This trend continued through 2008, when Boston's annual homeless census documented homeless families as the majority homeless population for the first time, counting them at an historic high number of 3,870 people. There are a number of economic factors that have contributed to and complicated this worrisome rise: foreclosures, which have displaced nearly 4,000 households since 2007, and unemployment, with the loss of 19,000 jobs in Boston since 2008.

Predictably, the rise of homeless families was concomitant with the rise of homeless children. However, the rise in the number of homeless children has been particularly steep. In 1994, there were 1,414 children classified as homeless in Boston, and that number continued to decline to 1,181 by 2004. In 2004, homeless children represented slightly more than 20% of the homeless population. By 2009, the number of homeless children had risen to 2,380, a near doubling in just four years. More significantly, while the number of homeless children doubled, the proportion of them as members of the class of homeless families tripled to 60% between 2004-2009.

BOSTON'S PROGRESS TO DATE

1983–2003: Eliminating Street Homelessness. Until 2003, the central tenet of Boston's homelessness strategy was to minimize street homelessness through provision of a robust emergency shelter system, and production of housing affordable to extremely low-income (ELI) persons, including the formerly homeless. Policies and initiatives to house the homeless during this period included: the creation of 1,000 new single-occupancy rooms; production of new supportive housing specifically targeted to the homeless; a homeless preference in allocation rent subsidies and public housing through the Boston Housing Authority (BHA); reclamation of 629 long-vacant public housing units of which 84% were occupied by the homeless; and a homeless set-aside policy for affordable rental housing development that required at least 10% of all new and preserved affordable rental units be made available to the homeless. The State's commitment to shelter every homeless family, even if that required temporary stays in hotel/motel rooms, has also been a critical part of the overall effort to minimize street homelessness.

Boston has been remarkably successful in achieving this goal. Presently, only 3.4% of Boston's homeless individuals are unsheltered. Nationally, the rate of unsheltered homeless individuals is 41.8%, or more than twelve times Boston's rate. Even more notable is the fact that there were no unsheltered families living on Boston's streets in 2008 or 2009, compared to the national rate of 27.2% of homeless families living on the streets during the same time period.

2003-2009: Testing New Strategies to Reduce Homelessness. The successful outcomes yielded by these innovations resulted in the City of Boston fundamentally rethinking its homelessness strategy. Beginning in 2003, the City's new goal became to end homelessness, whether the homeless person was on the street or in a shelter, and to prevent those at-risk for becoming homeless from entering into that state.

To achieve this new goal, Boston engaged in a number of pilot and demonstration programs. These programs placed homeless individuals directly from the streets into permanent supportive housing. The City also reprioritized federal funding toward permanent housing solutions for the chronically homeless. The number of homeless individual adults in more supportive living environments (e.g., transitional housing or recovery homes) as opposed to emergency shelter has almost doubled from 2002-2008. These efforts have contributed to significant declines in the number of adults in conventional emergency shelter: a 45% decrease from 2,394 in 2002 to 1,318 in 2009.

In addition, analysis from enacted homelessness prevention strategies, such as the Homelessness Prevention Clearinghouse and a diversion demonstration project, showed that as many as 42% of families that were seeking shelter could be accommodated outside the shelter system.

A NEW APPROACH TO ENDING HOMELESSNESS

When Mayor Thomas M. Menino introduced the concept of the *Leading the Way* comprehensive housing strategies in 2000, he made it clear that accomplishing the housing production goals and other established benchmarks was not intended to represent a finish line. Instead, achievement of these goals was meant to be a building block, a footing on which to base more expansive aims.

As stated in *Leading the Way III*, the City of Boston will no longer be satisfied with successfully managing the homelessness problem; it now intends to begin eliminating it. To achieve the twin goals of eliminating long-term individual homelessness and reducing family homelessness by at least 50%, the City will enact the five core strategies listed below:

- 1. Prevention.** The first, and most important line of defense against homelessness is prevention. Analysis of prevention efforts in Boston has shown that it takes an average \$1,691 per client to help avert homelessness. By contrast, emergency shelter can cost an average of \$2,250 per

month for hotel or motel placements. Beyond the cost savings, however, prevention is the more humane alternative. To prevent homelessness, the City will enact, support or employ the following strategies:

- a. An Early Warning System* to identify those at-risk of homelessness before their only option is the emergency shelter system;
- b. A Homelessness Prevention Network* to deliver homelessness prevention/tenancy stabilization services to those in need;
- c. Shelter Diversion Programs* to quickly stabilize or re-house people and keep them out of the emergency shelter system;
- d. Rental Housing Market Stabilization Initiatives* to prevent unnecessary evictions resulting from the current state of the rental housing market. This effort may include such initiatives as regulating condominium conversions, reducing evictions resulting from foreclosures, preventing other evictions through tenant advocacy and legal representation, preventing the loss of affordable housing to abandonment, financial/physical distress, or to market rate conversion.

2. Emergency Shelter. For some households, prevention of homelessness may not be possible. In these cases, individuals may continue to rely on a well-run emergency shelter system for their interim housing needs. Until the time that expanded homeless prevention activities result in significant declines from the 5,000 people a year who seek entry into emergency shelter, the shelter network will continue to be an important part of Boston's response to homelessness. However, entry into the shelter system should be considered the first step in the process that leads a homeless client to permanent housing. Currently, some shelter providers offer substance abuse and mental health counseling and referrals, education & job training assistance, criminal justice re-entry services, as well as supportive services like daycare that aid a client in utilizing the offered programs. However, the City believes that these services should be made available to all shelter residents.

3. Housing Placement Services. Housing placement is the primary mechanism by which the City will help people exit homelessness. There are almost 50,000 units of assisted housing in Boston. While not all have the right types of subsidies to house those in extreme poverty, many do. In addition, the BHA issues about 800 mobile housing vouchers each year. These vouchers may be used by homeless clients to access private market-rate housing stock, especially if appropriate support services for both the tenants and landlords can be linked to these placements. Connecting the homeless to these units as they become available at turnover could greatly increase the rate at which the homeless are placed out of the shelters. To aid in the effort to successfully arrange permanent housing, the City will enact, support or employ the following strategies:

- a. Universal Housing Database* will identify all units potentially available to the homeless with real-time vacancy information;
- b. A Rapid Re-housing Program* to quickly re-house those that have entered an emergency shelter but have few barriers to housing;
- c. A System of Housing Placement* to effectively coordinate housing placement programs in order to appropriately match the homeless with available housing opportunities;
- d. Reducing Barriers to Entry* for the homeless to gain access to the existing affordable housing supply.

4. New Housing Production. Boston has a long history of creating new affordable and supportive housing for its homeless; this new strategy does not alter that commitment. However, housing production goals may change as critical gaps in the housing system are identified and prioritized. For example, there may be a considerable number of homeless individuals or families currently in the shelter system for whom the housing supply, even with mobile support services, will not be workable. The production agenda for Boston will be determined by the identification of these key gaps in the supportive housing system. When identified, the City will find the developers and resources to produce new supportive housing to meet those needs. At the same time, continuing new production for ELI households will be needed to expand the long-term supply of units into which Boston's homeless can be placed.

5. Sustainable Permanent Housing. The success of the City's efforts to reduce homelessness over the longer term will require that all placements into permanent housing are sustainable over time, providing the kind of support services that aid clients in addressing the root problems that led to their homelessness. Without these services, some recently re-housed people will drift back toward homelessness, only to repeat the cycle. The City also recognizes that these services must reflect the diversity of issues that lead to homelessness: some clients will require workforce skill development and job placement; others may need medically-based support services; and still others will need services to gain access to the right income support programs. The City's efforts to end homelessness will include ensuring that appropriate support services are attached to as many homeless placements as possible, either as mobile client-linked services, or as development-based services.

A PLAN TO IMPLEMENT THIS STRATEGY

Successful implementation of this strategy will require organizing all available resources in a manner that supports the five core components of the City's strategy. To be successful, each of these functions must be well coordinated with clear goals and benchmarks to show progress over time. This effort will also require collaboration and cooperation among agencies, State agencies, and providers. To facilitate this effort, working groups populated by a wide variety of stakeholders are currently operating in teams to implement these five core components. To ensure the successful implementation of this effort, the City will assume responsibility for two key services:

1. Information Support. When there is good information about the target population, much more effective strategies and better outcomes result. It will be the City's responsibility to collect and disseminate critical information that supports the effective delivery of the five strategies. This includes establishing and maintaining a centralized listing of all those at-risk for homelessness, further developing a universal shelter client tracking and reporting system that can be used to analyze the shelter populations, especially target populations such as long-term stayers, and creating and maintaining a real-time database of housing units available to the homeless.

2. Advocacy & Resource Development. It will be important that the City, along with the service-provider and advocacy community, continue to work together ensure that homelessness remains a priority public issue and that sufficient resources to deliver this strategy are available. This will include a new effort to promote new civic, business, and institutional involvement in the campaign to substantially reduce homelessness. Resource priorities for the City include restoring/increasing funding to the Rental Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) and the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP) programs in a manner that most targets these resources to the homeless, developing a resource transition plan to ensure long-term sustainability for the homeless prevention and rapid re-housing services as the federal Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program (HPRP) resources decline over the next three years, and identifying and correcting key elements of existing resources that impede their effectiveness for the homeless agenda.