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HEADLINE: Mass. Ranks 8th-Best Overall Dealing With Homeless Kids

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Mass. ranks 8th-best overall dealing with homeless kids

By Abby Jordan

GateHouse News Service

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A report released this month by the National Center on Family Homelessness states that one in every 50 children in the nation is homeless, while in Massachusetts more than 17,505 youngsters don't have permanent homes.

The report ranks states based on the extent and risk of child homelessness, state policy and planning efforts and child well-being. It gives the Bay State a ranking as the eighth best, with Connecticut first and Texas faring the worst.

"Massachusetts is doing well compared to other states," said Dr. Ellen Bassuk, the center's president. "There's a problem and they're going after it."

While the state received a favorable ranking, homelessness is a growing problem as the economy flounders and unemployment rates march upward.

"The shelters are filled to capacity," Bassuk said.

In February 2008, the Department of Transitional Assistance had 1,916 families in its shelter program. That number increased to 2,546 this February, officials said.

Local officials are noticing a similar upward trend.

The Hudson Public Schools Health Services Department served 29 families struggling with homelessness during the 2007-2008 school year, said director of health and nursing and homeless liaison Wendy Doremus.

"We're well into the 30s this year," Doremus said. "We've passed the number served for the whole last school year."

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Doremus said there is a wide cross-section of families dealing with homelessness, including those in higher income brackets who have lost homes due to mortgage defaults or are in homes but can't afford them.

"It's not just the lowest of the low," she said.

The problem can also be hidden, with families choosing not to seek help and staying with relatives or friends, bouncing from one place to another.

"The general population doesn't think about a family living doubled up as homeless," she said.

The director of Marlborough's Department of Human Services, Rosalind Baker, said she has referred more people to shelters in the Framingham area as unemployment rates rise and people have a hard time paying their housing, heat and electric bills.

"There's definitely an increase in people in danger of becoming homeless," she said. "I have been doing quite a few referrals to shelters."

The Southborough Food Pantry has seen a 28 percent increase since June in the number of families it helps feed, now serving 47, said director Barbara Jandrue.

"There are a lot more out there that don't go because they're embarrassed," she said. "It's better to get free food and be able to pay the light bill."

The pantry is beginning to stock extra food in anticipation of 10 families it expects the state to place in a local hotel in April. It is also hoping to help those families by providing mini refrigerators and microwaves to store and cook food.

"We're trying to get stocked up for that so we're ready," she said.

At the state level, Bassuk said officials are taking steps to identify families at risk of becoming homeless, and to help them avoid that plight.

The National Center on Family Homelessness report classified the state's planning efforts on homelessness as "extensive," the highest designation, and center officials applauded Gov. Deval Patrick's administration for its steps to curb homelessness.

In 2007, Patrick issued an executive order to reestablish the Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness, chaired by Lt. Gov. Tim Murray.

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Council Executive Director Robert Pulster said that while individual homelessness has been decreasing, family homelessness in the state has been on the rise in the last year.

The council is tackling the issue by creating pilot regional networks with the aim of getting people into permanent housing using a "housing first" approach, funded by \$8 million from the state.

Though MetroWest is not among the eight regional networks, Pulster said the council has raised an additional \$1.3 million to fund initiatives in the southeastern part of the state and MetroWest, including Framingham and Marlborough, to help the homeless and those threatened with eviction.

"We're focusing on helping families sustain housing where they are," he said. "Folks do need emergency shelter, though we place favor in finding them permanent homes."

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