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HEADLINE: Shelter From the Storm: Homelessness is Rising, but the Government is Trying to Help

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# Shelter from the storm

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## Homelessness is rising, but the government is trying to help

MANY come to the centre for homeless families in the Bronx with everything they own—a toddler in one hand, a suitcase in the other. New York is seeing a rising number of homeless families because of the recession. In February nearly 40% more applied for shelter in New York than had done a year earlier.

It is the same story all across the country. San Francisco had to open its winter shelter two months early last year. Louisville, Kentucky, reported an increase of more than 58% in family homelessness in 2008. Although national data on homelessness in 2008 will not become available for several months, most agree that there are “staggering increases”, according to Ellen Bassuk, executive director of the National Centre on Family Homelessness.

Some cities, like Boston, have adopted a desperate solution to put a roof over people’s heads: motels. Entire families are placed in one room at these “welfare motels”, which are often far away from schools and grocery stores. Geography is not their only drawback. They are an expensive way of housing people, costing governments as much as \$100 per room each night. And many motels do not have caseworkers assigned to them, so people sent there do not get the same support they would have received in shelters.

To help both the homeless and cash-strapped local governments, the federal government has made \$1.5 billion available through the stimulus bill, passed in February. The money, which doubles the federal funds available to fight homelessness, is being allocated to cities and states to try to stop the problem occurring. The money will

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help families pay rent and utility bills, as well as increasing "case-management units" to help people find jobs and get rehoused. The money should be rolled out in the next few months, and cities and states receiving it have been urged to spend it quickly.

Advocates for the homeless are pleased. The National Alliance to End Homelessness estimated at first that an extra 1.5m people could become homeless in this recession; it now thinks the numbers will be lower thanks to the government.

But not everyone is dancing in the streets. Larry Meredith, director of the Department of Health and Human Services in Marin County, California, objects that the new surge of funding is for prevention only, and will not go towards maintaining existing services for those who are already homeless. According to Mr Meredith, a shelter that provides beds for about 60 people in Marin will probably soon close because of lack of funding. Its residents will lose yet another home, of sorts.