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## A FUTURE WITHOUT HOMELESSNESS

We don't have to study homelessness," state Representative Byron Rushing says of a new state commission that he proposed to address the issue; good research is already available.

Instead, the commission has to answer two questions. What kind of housing do people need? And, what will it take to keep formerly homeless people housed?

If Massachusetts can find and pay for answers, it could end homelessness -- for families, adults living on the streets, people leaving prison, and those with mental illnesses or addictions.

"We're on the cusp of a new era," says Tina Brooks, the state's undersecretary of housing. The commission should work to meet its self-imposed deadline and come up with a comprehensive plan by December.

Rushing says there could be "some sticker shock" when the commission calculates costs. Still, adequate public funding will be essential. If the commission succeeds, Rushing predicts that its methods will help the state tackle other big problems, such as affordable housing and poverty.

Committing the state to ending homelessness is a vital step. When Governor Patrick signed legislation to launch the commission last week, he said he hoped it would lead to permanent housing, a resource that could dramatically improve people's lives.

The commission plans to find out what cities and towns are already doing to end homelessness, so this

work can become part of the state plan. Once the plan is drawn up, it should be implemented quickly.

A key piece involves creating a careful transition away from shelters and toward providing more supportive housing, which includes social services that could range from substance abuse programs to financial literacy classes. Shelter providers and other nonprofit organizations could help deliver these services, helping to ensure that people's specific needs are met. And because formerly homeless people may have future problems -- job losses, addiction relapses, or illnesses -- there should be long-term outreach to prevent setbacks.

To its credit, the commission's 30 members are diverse. The group includes Lieutenant Governor Timothy Murray; Rushing and nine other state senators and representatives; Mayor Menino; Steven Pierce, chief justice of the housing court; Dr. JudyAnn Bigby and Dan O'Connell, respectively the state's secretaries of health and human services and economic development; and Lyndia Downie, the president of the Pine Street Inn, which provides shelter and housing. And having Leslie Kirwan, the state's secretary of administration and finance, as a member suggests serious thought will be given to funding.

Ending homelessness once seemed like a pipe dream. Now it appears to be a job that Massachusetts can do.

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