



## 10-year plan: Put an end to homelessness

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### **Ambitious blueprint stresses specific goals for placing state's 4,000 homeless in housing instead of temporary shelters**

State officials are finishing an ambitious plan to find money, services and housing for the state's more than 4,000 homeless men, women and children.

The plan, unveiled Friday at a state Housing Resources Commission meeting, calls for ending homelessness in 10 years.

"The goal is to get people into housing as opposed to having people languish in shelters," said Howard Burchman, a principal with the New York City-based Housing Innovations and a coauthor of the plan.

Under the plan — the state's second in six years — all the homeless veterans would be housed in the next five years.

Veterans are at risk of becoming homeless because of the sometimes difficult transition from combat to private life, Burchman said.

According to local Veterans Affairs officials, hundreds of Rhode Island veterans are homeless every year. Nationwide, says the annual Homeless Assessment Report, 67,495 veterans were homeless on a single night in January 2011.

The state's chronic homeless — some struggling with addiction, disabilities and other health problems — would also be housed by 2017 under the plan.

"There will still be homeless people, but a system will be in place to help them," said Suzanne Wagner, a co-author of the plan. "The idea is to get to zero."

The Housing Resources Commission is expected to approve the plan in March.

**The recommendations** update a 2006 plan that did not include as many state departments and agencies and centered on policy goals rather than measurable outcomes, said Michael Tundra, chief of the state Office of Housing and Community Development.

The new plan, which emphasizes prevention and housing, is based on discussions not only with department heads and agency directors, but also workers and homeless people.

The proposal, in line with President Obama's plan to end homelessness, has already won praise from some experts and agency directors.

"This is one of the best plans I've ever seen," said Eric Hirsch, a Providence College professor who tracks the state's homeless population.

It includes concrete targets and shows how resources can be used, he said.

If the state's leaders and lawmakers work together, "we can be the first state to end homelessness," he said.

Officials will build on two successful programs that emphasize housing — Housing First and the Neighborhood Opportunities Program. Both embrace the argument that housing stabilizes homeless Rhode Islanders and costs less than providing the homeless with shelter beds. Without homes, people end up in emergency rooms, detox centers or in the courts.

"Doing the right thing is less costly than what we are doing today," Burchman said.

For the plan to work, agencies and officials must work more closely together and rely on a shared client list, Burchman said.

Before the recession, many of the state's social-service agencies "lived in their own organizational silos," said Jim Ryczek, executive director of the Rhode Island Coalition for the Homeless.

Working in unison will help, he said. But following the plan won't be easy.

**The recommendations** come at a time when lawmakers have cut money for affordable housing. And federal lawmakers are focused on cutting federal programs.

"We're going to have to work hard to make the recommendations happen," said Tundra. "It will be a challenge."

Still, the plan includes new data that will help social-service agencies make their case for additional money, Ryczek said. "We haven't had such a tool before. We're encouraged."

Nearly 14 percent of the state's population is considered poor under federal guidelines. Nearly 6 percent — 61,000 — is in deep poverty and at risk of homelessness.

## BY THE NUMBERS

Without a home

Rhode Island's homeless population is growing

4,396 Homeless in 2010

4,154 Homeless in 2009

4,083 Homeless in 2008

3,851 Homeless in 2007