

CommonWealth

HOUSING / OPINION

The invisible homelessness

Majority of shelter population is families

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FAMILY HOMELESSNESS is sometimes called the invisible homelessness since these mothers and children are more likely to seek nightly shelter in public places – in a hospital emergency room, at a bus station, or huddled together in a car – not necessarily in plain view. As a result, people regularly fail to realize how widespread the problem of family homelessness is, particularly here in the Bay State.

The numbers paint a more realistic and alarming picture. A recent study commissioned by the Boston Foundation found that the number of homeless families in the Commonwealth nearly doubled over the past nine years, with a 93 percent increase between 2008 and 2016. The study also found it is indeed family homelessness that dominates the homeless landscape in Massachusetts, with the majority of the shelter population being comprised of families.

Today, 84 percent of families experiencing homelessness are headed by mothers, many of whom suffer from a number of mental and physical health issues that stem from chronic poverty, domestic violence, and lack of stable housing, childcare, and employment. These factors driving family homelessness are often quite different from those influencing individual homelessness, most notably, because children are involved.

Children make up 60 percent of the 13,174 people experiencing family homelessness on any given day in the Commonwealth. Children in homeless families are impacted by the stress their mothers are experiencing and have

themselves likely suffered one or more traumatic events in their young lives. Without the safety and security of a permanent home, and without readily available food or a steady routine (like school), these children experience fear and anxiety regularly and at higher rates than children in homes.

But there is hope, and there are solutions that are very much within reach.

In our program, we tackle the problem of family homelessness with a “whole-family approach.” Each individual receives customized services – while taking into account the family unit as a whole. Ending family homelessness requires programs and services that target all of the contributing factors, from health concerns (including addiction and mental health) to providing access to education, life skills and employment training, and financial, emotional and behavioral support.

More than 10 years ago, Carmella was a 23-year-old mother of two, including a newborn, who was looking to remove herself and her children from the domestic violence she was experiencing in her relationship. At Brookview, she found not only the shelter she needed, but encouragement and childcare support to earn her GED, the guidance to set goals for herself and her children, and training around handling finances and securing permanent housing. Carmella continues to live in a permanent home with her now four children, and works in a rewarding career helping other families facing similar hardships, financial difficulties, and evictions.

To be sure, a number of organizations are already addressing various factors contributing to our high rates of family homelessness in Massachusetts, from advocacy around public policy, to job training programs, childcare initiatives, prevention and more. In addition, our city and state leaders are working to reduce the number of families in motels and increase affordable housing opportunities. But clearly we’re not there yet.

While family homelessness is a complex issue, the solution is remarkably simple at its core and unquestionably achievable: invest in families by providing mothers with access to education and training that enables them to enter into jobs that earn a living wage. In addition, we need to provide moms with access to specialized, trauma-informed childcare and services.

Families are the lifeblood of the Bay State’s neighborhoods. By helping families thrive as active and integral members of their communities, we improve these communities for all of us.

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