Homeless Advocates Express Disappointment over Senate State Budget

May 18, 2016 By Aneri Pattani

Homelessness service providers across the Commonwealth are concerned they could face a tough year ahead, as the state budget proposal cuts nearly $800,000 from funds for the assistance of homeless individuals.

On Tuesday, the Senate Ways and Means Committee released its budget proposal for fiscal year 2017. The committee allocated about $44 million to line item 7004-0102, which funds more than three dozen organizations contracted by the state to provide services to homeless individuals.

While this allocation represents only a 2 percent decrease from the $44.8 million given to such programs last year, many service providers said the budget is pinching the purse strings tight for programs that are already struggling to make ends meet.

“We’re pretty disappointed at that reduction,” said Aimee Coolidge, director of community and government relations at the Pine Street Inn. “We’re bursting at the seams here. We don’t have a bed for everyone who comes here, but we don’t turn them away.”

More than 100 people a night often have to sleep on the floor or on extra cots set up in the shelter lobby, Coolidge said.

“We’re spending most of our time trying to accommodate the overflow,” she said.

This leaves few resources to help people find affordable housing, train for jobs, or treat substance abuse and mental health issues – all key steps for moving people out of shelters and reducing dependence on the shelter system.

Coolidge expects the problem to continue, as costs rise and state funding falls short.

The need for shelter beds far exceeds the 2,856 that are contracted by the Department of Housing and Community Development under line item 7004-0102.

A 2015 survey commissioned by the Coalition for Homeless Individuals found that the total number of shelter beds available through providers, including emergency and transitional beds, is 3,538. That means nearly 700 beds receive no state funding.

Organizations like Father Bill’s & MainSpring, which has shelters in Quincy and Brockton, try to make up the difference through private and federal funds, but it’s no easy task.
“We’re putting over $1 million in just to make sure we’re filling the gap from what we’re not getting from the state,” said John Yazwinski, executive director of the group.

Yazwinski, along with other service providers and the Coalition for Homeless Individuals, is asking the state to increase its funding for line 7004-0102 to $50 million.

The Senate Ways and Means Committee did not immediately return messages seeking comment.

Many of the organizations funded by this line item have seen a surge in homeless individuals seeking assistance over the past few years.

Since 2008, Father Bill’s & MainSpring has experienced a 67 percent increase in its average nightly shelter count, Yazwinski said. The shelter now averages 261 clients each evening.

“We’re at a tipping point here,” Yazwinski said. “We have people sleeping on the floor every night.”

At the Pine Street Inn, Coolidge said the shelters were 14 percent over capacity during the winter months – an even higher demand than the shelters saw during the record-breaking winter of 2015.

The surge in individuals seeking shelter is a response to numerous factors, Coolidge said. The opioid crisis and the closing of Long Island shelter are sending many people out onto the streets. Others can’t find jobs and have few places to turn, since there is a lack of homelessness prevention resources.

Kelly Turley, director of legislative advocacy at the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, said one of the biggest factors driving homelessness, particularly in Boston, is the soaring price of housing.

“The fair market rent is nowhere matching what a household can realistically afford to pay without a housing subsidy,” she said.

Decreasing state funding isn’t the only hurdle service providers are facing in trying to meet the needs of an increasing number of individuals. Federal funding for the Commonwealth’s homelessness programs was also cut this year.

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development cut its grants to the state by $2 million from last year. According to a department spokeswoman, HUD is focusing on housing-first projects and limiting funding for supportive services.

As a result of the cuts, the Pine Street Inn had to eliminate a program that helped individuals prepare for and find jobs.
“It’s pretty devastating to lose that funding for an important resource,” Coolidge said.

Yazwinski said Father Bill’s & MainSpring had to cut a similar program. He had hoped the state would step up to fund what HUD did not, but has been disappointed.

“We’ve turned to the state to say there’s still a need for funding for transitional programs, but we haven’t been able to get them to understand,” Yazwinski said.

Coolidge said she hopes the funding for such programs will increase during the amendments process before the budget is finalized.

“The programs in this line item do more than providing three hot meals and a cot,” Coolidge said. “They do what they need to do to get people out of homelessness. That progress can’t continue without the resources.”