

Advocates rally for Vermont homeless

Burlington Free Press – Terri Hallenbeck



MONTPELIER — A day when the temperature is 7 degrees out at noon is an appropriate day to highlight homelessness.

On the steps of the Statehouse on Wednesday, Linda Ryan of the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness took her time introducing speakers. The bite of the bitter cold sets in that way and the crowd catches a flavor for how a person without a home might feel, she said.

“We’ve been standing out here on these steps for too many years,” Patrick Flood, deputy secretary of Human Services, said to applause muffled by mittened hands. “In fact, it just seems to get worse every year.”

The death of a homeless man on a Burlington street last month gives the issue renewed urgency, said his boss, Human Services Secretary Doug Racine.

His agency is seeking \$1.6 million in the midyear budget adjustment bill that includes money for emergency housing assistance.

Ryan, who is executive director of development at the Samaritan House in St. Albans, said the homeless problem has grown worse. The number of people who have come through her shelter has tripled in the past few years, she said.

Samaritan has four families staying in motels after filling its three apartments, she said. “That’s unheard of in St. Albans,” she said.

Melinda Bussino, executive director of the Brattleboro Area Drop In Center, later told legislators that the overflow, winter-only shelter there has seen a spike in clients from 47 a year ago to 68 this year.

According to the state Office of Economic Opportunity, the number of people in emergency shelters in Vermont on a given night increased from 302 in 2007 to 438 in 2011.

Ryan said she wants the state to spend its money on helping people obtain or keep housing, not on putting them up in motels as an emergency measure.

Flood said there is a plan about to be enacted that will do that. Those at risk of losing their homes because they're short on the rent or mortgage would receive a subsidy, he said. The goal is to keep them from becoming homeless and needing emergency housing that the state provides in emergencies, he said.

Rita Markley, executive director of the Committee on Temporary Shelter in Burlington, urged lawmakers at an afternoon committee meeting inside the heated Statehouse to focus on efforts that have proven successful.

She said that includes a four-year program to work with clients at risk of becoming homeless to make sure they don't. COTS started that program with \$250,000 privately raised. The state then joined the next year with \$110,000 and has continued to contribute, she said.

Since 2008, Markley said, the program has kept 816 families in their homes, preventing children in those families from being taunted as "Shelter Trash."

After the death last month of 56-year-old Paul O'Toole in Burlington, some argued that the city needed more beds for homeless people with substance abuse problems. Markley argued that's not the case. The Wilson Hotel in downtown Burlington allows intoxicated clients who aren't disruptive, she said, and on an intensely cold night like Tuesday, all the shelters are open to anyone. COTS had 10 more overnight guests than usual Tuesday night, she said.