

Homeless crisis deepens in Massachusetts

John Marion
16 December 2013

A supposedly successful example of the “innovation economy,” Massachusetts is in reality a state where thousands of working class families, single adults, and children cannot find adequate shelter or food.

Because of a combination of increasing homelessness, cuts in federal benefits, and cuts in state funding for shelters, thousands of people are being housed in motel rooms for periods of as long as a year. The *Boston Globe* reported on December 2 that families with school-age children are being moved from the Boston area to motels in Springfield and Greenfield, some two hours to the west of where the children normally go to school.

The state’s reaction to the crisis has been to move families to whatever motels are available, in a completely arbitrary pattern. Motels in Chicopee, near Springfield, are housing 223 families, while Waltham, to the west of Boston, has 204, and Danvers, to the north, has 176. Holyoke, also near Springfield, has 141, while Springfield itself has 49. Because many of the locations are not accessible by public transportation, getting to or looking for work can be impossible.

Families are also being shuttled from one motel to another. The web site of the *Springfield Republican* reported on November 8 about a family of four forced to move from a Springfield Motel to one in Chicopee, with the added indignity of a strict curfew.

The *Globe* article included the story of a University of Massachusetts Boston freshman whose family was moved to a motel in Northborough, 40 miles west of Boston. The family had to leave the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston solely because their rent subsidy expired. The 18-year-old was forced to stay with friends because of the impossible commute to UMass, while her 11-year-old brother missed three weeks of school.

According to the web site of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, “As of October 29, 2013,

there were approximately 4,100 families with children and pregnant women in Massachusetts’ Emergency Assistance” programs, and 2,100 of those families were living in motels.

Inadequate funding for homeless shelters has made the crisis worse. One of Democratic Governor Deval Patrick’s signature programs—called HomeBASE, and marketed as a means of getting people out of shelters and into more stable housing—was cut in the fiscal year 2014 budget at the governor’s request. Even as initially conceived, the program provided a paltry \$4,000 per year for recipients. At market rates, this amount would hardly cover two months of rent on a two-bedroom apartment in many parts of the state.

US Census Bureau calculations for a Supplemental Poverty Measure—which factors in food stamps, tax credits and other government support, minus tax payments, work expenses and out-of-pocket medical costs—stipulates five-year estimates of “median gross rents for two-bedroom apartments with complete kitchen and plumbing facilities,” adjusted by geographic area.

Citing a 2011 study by the state’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the federal Centers for Disease Control, the Coalition for the Homeless calculates that more than 13,000 high school students in Massachusetts were homeless at the time of the study, and nearly 6,000 of them were not accompanied by an adult. It found that only 17 percent of these students were eating breakfast every morning, that 43 percent had “had sexual contact against their will,” and that 17 percent had made a serious suicide attempt. The study is administered biannually.

The city of Boston’s contribution to the 2013 United States Conference of Mayors Hunger and Homelessness Survey—released this week—states that not only did the number of homeless families increase by 14 percent since the last report, but that the city

expects the number to increase “substantially” over the next year.

It adds that 14 percent of homeless adults in the city were employed, estimates that 25 percent of the need for shelter was not met last year, and describes the abysmal conditions in shelters: they “have had to increase the number of persons or families that can sleep in a single room” and “consistently have clients sleep on overflow cots, in chairs, in hallways, or use other subpar sleeping arrangements.”

Nor is the problem limited to homelessness. The mayors’ survey estimates that 36 percent of the demand for food assistance went unmet in Boston last year, that requests for assistance increased 13 percent, and that 83 percent of those requesting assistance were families. Recent and future cuts to federal SNAP benefits are therefore leading to starvation. In such conditions, people are often forced to choose between food, housing, and needed medical care. More than 21 percent of Bostonians are living below the poverty line.

The *Globe* interviewed UMass economist Randy Albelda, who stressed that families that have been living on the edge are running out of resources. The paper concluded that “many families were able to stay off the streets by living off savings, doubling up with family members, or sleeping on friends’ couches.” The descent into homelessness from such precarious conditions is common.

Albelda went on to tell the newspaper: “Families close to the edge have not been able to pull back from the edge in this recovery ... that’s in part because the recovery has not affected the bottom 30 to 40 percent of people.”

What he left unsaid is the other “part” of the crisis: the local and international transfer of wealth from workers to the financial elite, for whom the *Globe* speaks. The paper was recently sold by the *New York Times* to billionaire commodity trader and sports mogul John Henry. It is genuinely worried about popular upheavals, writing in its December 2 article that “even as stocks soar to new heights and real estate values rebound, many of the state’s poorest residents remain without jobs and homes four years after the last recession.”

The lie that “there isn’t enough money” has been once again exposed. An October 2012 article from the *Boston Business Journal* reported that nearly 12,000

Massachusetts residents earned more than \$1 million apiece in 2010, and that the number had increased by 25 percent since 2009. The total 2010 income of these people was \$41.3 billion, or 47 times the size of the 2014 state budget for Housing and Community Development.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact