

Expert: Solving Homelessness In Massachusetts Means Shifting From Shelters

By Chris Lisinski

State House News Service

Ending chronic homelessness in Massachusetts does not depend on discovering some still-unknown strategy, but instead requires amassing the “political will” to shift away from the existing shelter-centered approach, a top expert said Tuesday.

Sam Tsemberis, who helped pioneer a “housing first” model emphasizing subsidies to place people into homes and more accessible social services, told lawmakers that Bay Staters living on the streets is a “solvable problem.”

But in Tsemberis’s view, getting to that goal will require Massachusetts to rethink its use of dormitory-style congregate care shelters and how they interact with social services, particularly for those struggling with substance use disorders.

“Even though there are pockets of housing first all over Massachusetts and all over the country, they are pockets and the predominant model still remains the shelter model,” Tsemberis said during a legislative briefing hosted by the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance. “People have to get clean and sober, they have to prove they’re participating in treatment, somehow complying with the rules. It’s a compliance model as a way to earn housing or be worthy of housing.”

Tsemberis pointed to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s VA Supportive Housing, or HUD-VASH, program, which combines housing vouchers with VA services for veterans

in need. Using that model, Tsemberis said, 83 U.S. cities have “ended veterans’ homelessness.”

He also praised the city of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County for coalescing behind a “housing first” response, featuring a multi-year plan with benchmarks and the resources required to achieve it.

In the most recent count, Tsemberis said, Boston had about 1,400 residents experiencing chronic homelessness, compared to just 17 in Milwaukee in the wake of the city’s strategy shift.

“Is it solvable? Yes. Do we have the vaccine to do it? Yes. What we need is exactly what we’re doing now: we need to build the political will to put together the components that will drive the number down to zero,” Tsemberis, who today leads the Pathways Housing First Institute, said.

The Legislature has recently enacted measures aimed at reducing zoning barriers to housing production, particularly in areas with MBTA service, but legislative leaders have not named housing or homelessness among their priority areas for additional action in the remaining months of the 2021-2022 lawmaking session.

MHSA urged lawmakers to rally in support behind a bill filed by Leominster Rep. Natalie Higgins (H 3959) that it said would take the constellation of congregate, dormitory-style shelters offline over a five-year period and replace it with a new emergency housing program focused on placing those in need into subsidized housing units of their own while keeping them connected to support services.

Higgins said Tuesday that the bill aims to avoid residents getting uprooted or displaced to a new community if they lose their housing and ensure that “no matter where you live, you have safe, affordable and accessible housing.”

The Housing Committee last month favorably reported Higgins’s

bill, which is now under review by the Health Care Financing Committee.

Sen. Paul Feeney, a Foxborough Democrat, said during Tuesday's event that he believes his colleagues need to move past a "carrot-and-stick approach" to intertwined housing and addiction issues.

He criticized the "mindset that we've always had that you have to earn your way into housing."

"We have never seen where a moment of clarity comes when somebody is living on the street or in the woods somewhere or in an alley somewhere," Feeney said. "But where we do see that moment of clarity that allows sobriety is when people are stable. The more that we allow them to be stable, without destabilizing their environment and kicking them out onto the street, then they have those opportunities to have that moment of clarity."