



Wisconsin State Legislature

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A Helping Hand For The Homeless

In 2017, there were 21,906 homeless people who found help from a variety of private and public agencies around the state. While some are able to access services, many are not. On any given winter night, there are 3,470 people sleeping in areas not intended for human habitation including cars, parks, forests and caves. In that same year, 17,905 people stayed in emergency shelters and the data shows that homelessness is not only a problem in urban areas. Outside of Milwaukee, Dane and Racine County, there were 10,015 people in emergency shelters. With these numbers in mind, the state legislature created the Wisconsin Interagency Council on Homelessness with the mission to establish a statewide policy with the purpose of preventing and ending homelessness in this state.

At the end of last year, the Interagency Council on Homelessness released a state action plan called *A Hand and a Home: Foundations for Success*. The plan asks for \$3.75 million in new spending annually, with identified performance metrics tied to each funding stream to make sure we can evaluate the effectiveness of these programs. A series of bills have been introduced to enact their recommendations, including two bills I have introduced in the State Senate.

One of the best ways to reduce homelessness is to prevent it from happening in the first place. The first bill, Senate Bill 144 adds \$500,000 to the Homeless Prevention Program to help prevent evictions. A temporary income disruption, such as a medical emergency or loss of a job, is one of the main reasons people fail to pay rent. This prevention program can pay landlords for the back-rent they need to help avoid an eviction. It also provides \$300,000 annually to begin a statewide diversion program. This will allow the state to provide short-term assistance to people who are

homeless to help them find stable housing outside the traditional homelessness system. While this additional funding would be used to provide assistance to individuals, the goal is not to create government dependency, but rather to help people regain their independence.

The second bill, Senate Bill 145, would add \$500,000 annually to the Homeless Case Management Services Program, which was created in the 2017-19 biennial budget. Often, a person facing homelessness has other challenges in their life as well. Getting them back on their feet may mean helping them find a job or in some cases a better-paying job. It also includes helping them navigate getting food stamps, finding childcare, enrolling in Medical Assistance, and keeping their children in school. In their research, the Interagency Council on Homelessness found, “Successful case management leads to better housing outcomes, better physical and mental health, decreased abuse of drugs and alcohol, better re-integration into society, decreased costs for crisis response systems, and an overall improvement in quality of life.” In the first round of grant applications, there were many more applicants than funds available, limiting the program while showing a clear need for additional services. Increasing funding for the Homeless Case Management Services program will allow it to serve more people.

Creating a council consisting of leaders from different state agencies demonstrated the state’s commitment to address the problem of homelessness. By creating a venue for state agencies and advocacy groups to work together, they were able to develop creative recommendations to combat homelessness. While it may be unrealistic to think that homelessness can be eradicated in Wisconsin, we can work toward creating a state where homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring. This is an achievable goal and one I believe is worthwhile.

If you have any questions about any of the information I have included or if you have suggestions on other topics or issues you would like learn more about, you may call my office toll-free at (800) 991-5541; write me at P.O. Box 7882, Madison, WI 53707; or e-mail me at: Sen.Olsen@legis.state.wi.us. You can also sign up for our newsletter at our website: <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/senate/sen14/news/index.htm>.