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Editorial: Chronic homelessness can end in Minnesota

Positive results from a statewide effort.

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It may not be obvious to the more than 9,000 Minnesotans who have no permanent home to go to tonight, but this state is making strides toward not just managing long-term homelessness, but ending it.

That was the message Wednesday at a Minnesota Meeting luncheon, where a crowd of more than 500 in Minneapolis and scores more in satellite locations around the state attested to keen interest in combatting chronic homelessness and its attendant ills. Minnesotans increasingly recognize that homelessness contributes mightily to underachievement in school, poor performance in the workplace, and climbing social service costs for taxpayers.

The number of homeless in Minnesota has declined a bit in recent years after peaking in 2003. That may be because state and local government policy has expanded its focus from the immediate needs of the homeless to securing a permanent roof over the heads of those who most persistently lack one. Tim Marx, commissioner of the state Housing Finance Agency, said that for 2,600 formerly homeless households, permanent shelter has been provided with an array of supportive services to help residents address employment, health and social needs.

That "supportive housing" strategy is working and is on track to effectively end long-term homelessness by 2010, Marx said. "We have a plan, and we are producing results." But getting there will require sustained effort, and that means more money from both the public and private sectors.

The Legislature is doing its part, with a \$30 million appropriation in 2007 and \$20 million in capital authorization in 2006. Now it's Congress's turn. Particularly helpful would be federal enactment of the National Affordable Housing Trust Fund, which was approved by the House last month and awaits Senate action. It would provide or preserve 1.5 million units of affordable housing in this country over the next decade. In addition, expansion of the federal Section 8 housing subsidy program, which can assist with both rental and purchase costs, is long overdue.

The Minneapolis Foundation, organizer of the long-running Minnesota Meeting series, is taking the lead in seeking more private donations and volunteer support for this worthy cause. (Its Fund to End Homelessness in Minnesota accepts donations, and its partner, Hands On Twin Cities, recruits volunteers, at www.minnesotameeting.com.)

Ending homelessness in Minnesota is an elusive and important goal that may now be within reach.

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