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Our Turn

## Homelessness is not just a winter problem Concord needs a comprehensive plan

By Ellen Fries and Page Cannon for the Monitor  
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Yes! The city should plan a winter shelter now! (Monitor editorial, June 30.)

The editor is exactly on point. Concord must plan now its response to families and individuals without a home - but not just during winter months.

Two years ago, after an attempt at using the empty Dewey School as a winter homeless shelter for families failed due to neighborhood resistance, the state offered short-term use of its Tobey School on the state hospital grounds. A swift and comprehensive response by an array of nonprofit organizations, private donors and volunteers produced nearly three months of shelter for several families. Last winter the city stepped forward to offer use of a portion of the Concord Housing Authority's Crutchfield Building. Again, with a cobbled-together support system, families were able to fare well enough in the state's capital city.

A lot has been learned from these experiences. These have been crisis-oriented, stopgap, last-minute measures, heavily dependent upon the drive and initiative of providers, volunteers and scant financial support - not unlike the cold weather shelters provided by the South and First Congregational Churches offered to adults.

Families and individuals are homeless year-round. The problem is exacerbated during the "100 days of winter," when living outside is not possible and being doubled up with friends or family who offer a corner of their living space can become unbearable to all, including landlords. Families and individuals without housing have needs that go beyond shelter. They require support services to assist them in addressing the root causes of homelessness: employment counseling, education, budgeting, parenting skills, primary or behavioral healthcare. If left unaddressed, these issues often result in continued homelessness. The staff providing shelter management and support services must be professionally trained in empowering people to establish goals and behaviors that promote personal responsibility for coping with their circumstances. Volunteers serve a vital role but cannot substitute for professional caseworkers.

What Concord needs is a 10-year plan to end homelessness, similar to those created for Manchester and Nashua and for the state. The federal government has just released its newest iteration of such a plan, following an initiative begun by President George W. Bush earlier in the decade. These plans are multifaceted and collaborative at all levels of government and across all sectors.

Objective No. 10 of the new "Federal Strategic Plan to End Homelessness" is this: "Transform homeless services to crisis response systems that prevent homelessness and rapidly return people who experience homelessness to stable housing."

This is what the Concord community needs to be supporting. Other objectives of the federal plan include the development of affordable housing for all citizens; housing with support services; and increased economic security and improved health and stability. The Concord Coalition to End Homelessness has been making slow but steady progress in these areas but needs citizen, government, social service and legislative involvement to achieve these goals.

Let us take some action and work collaboratively on a family shelter before winter. And let us get to work on a 10-year plan to end homelessness in Concord that will have meaningful and concrete steps with a specific timeline and measurements of success. We have the possibility, in our relatively small and manageable city, to make real progress toward ending homelessness as a permanent way of life.

***(Ellen Fries and Page Cannon are members of the board of the Concord Coalition to End Homelessness.)***

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