

Panel says put roof over homeless heads

Other services called secondary to success

By Danielle M. Horn TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF
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WORCESTER — As president of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, Nan Roman has seen and monitored the consequences of living on the street, both to the homeless and the taxpayer.

She used the example of, “David,” a Washington, D.C., man who, after spending decades in prison, became a free man but found himself lost. Often, he considered re-offending so he could return to jail: at least there, she said, he would have meals and a roof over his head.

“It took \$44,400 in public funds to keep David homeless,” Ms. Roman said, tallying up the psychological services, court and shelter costs that the man built up in less than a year on the streets. “When we talk about ending homelessness, we should be talking about doing it in a smarter, more efficient way.”

A hundred public and private sector leaders in Central Massachusetts met at the Beechwood Hotel yesterday for a health policy and homelessness program hosted by the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts. Speakers included Ms. Roman, Lt. Gov. Timothy P. Murray and former Lt. Gov. Thomas P. O’Neill III, son of the late Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill Jr., speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1977 to 1987.

Central to the speakers’ remarks was the concept of “Housing First” — getting homeless housing as soon as possible, even if issues such as alcoholism and drug abuse are still a problem.

“‘Services first,’ does not work for everyone,” said Ms. Roman, who traveled from Washington, D.C., for the event. “Sometimes, that means we’re going to be providing subsidized housing to people with substance abuse problems who have not resolved their problems.”

Ms. Roman maintained that an initial investment of several thousand dollars — the cost of first month’s and last month’s rent — is a more cost-effective way of combating homelessness than keeping them in shelters “for months on end.”

The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts names ending homelessness as one of its top priorities. Since 2007, the foundation has contributed \$1.6 million to projects that address homelessness, and expects to commit an additional \$500,000 to the cause over the next two years.

These funds have gone to the Home Again project, where homeless people are housed and provided with case management and support services. A Boston University study found that Home Again participants have been two-and-a-half times as likely to achieve and maintain housing, compared to those who received standard care.

Homelessness is a funding priority for the health foundation because of the health risks that accompany living on the streets.

“Homelessness can be a cause and a consequence of poor health,” said Carlton A. Watson, chairman of the foundation board for the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts. “The homeless have a substantially greater risk for a range of health problems.”

Mr. O’Neill, who served as lieutenant governor from 1975 to 1983 and now runs a consulting business, spoke from family experience about the contributing factors to homelessness.

His brother, Michael, another member of the politically famous O’Neill family, died at 42 from alcohol and drug abuse.

He described his brother as very smart, but “at the age of 23 or 24, something went awry.”

“We knew there was an addiction to alcohol and drugs,” Mr. O’Neill said. “He became a vagabond, homeless. And at the ripe old age of 42, his last year of life, his motor skills were completely amuck.”

“If all that can happen in Tip and Millie O’Neill’s house, it can happen in anyone’s house.”

Mr. O’Neill recognized the many social service and medical workers at the event.

“You have an awful lot of work to do, but a hearty congratulations on the work you do do,” he said.