by Joe Lamport
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Last year, Mayor Michael Bloomberg made reducing the number of homeless people in the city a top priority, launching an action plan long in the making.

Looking at three relevant programs, we can see some progress and some significant challenges.

Two of the programs are initiatives of the city. New Department of Homeless Services Commissioner Robert Hess, who arrives from Philadelphia, has reasons to be both excited and apprehensive because of these programs. The promising one is the HomeBase program, a group of centers run by community-based organizations in areas of the city that send the most people to city shelters. But the city's rent subsidy program, Housing Stability Plus, is widely viewed as a mess.

It also has been about 15 months since a third initiative, led by Administrative Judge Fern Fisher of the Civil Court of New York City, the Housing Help Program, was launched in the Bronx. That program shows some promise, too.

Programs to prevent homelessness are viewed as both cost-effective and compassionate. But some question whether their cost-effectiveness also translates into any kind of real effectiveness.

"There are some major over-arching problems in the housing market and government policy that prevention programs do not address," said Andy Scherer, executive director of Legal Services for New York City. "The most important thing to do would be to have in place an adequate supply of affordable housing that low-income people can have access to.

"I use the analogy of musical chairs," Scherer continued. "When you have 10 chairs and 11 people, someone can't be seated. We can spend a lot of time dealing with how to help the 11th person cope with that, but the truth of the matter is [it would be better to have] 11 chairs."

HomeBase

In the fall of 2004, the city set up six HomeBase programs in partnership with community-based organizations in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan and Queens. (See my article from October, 2004 New Programs Aim To Prevent Homelessness)

In the neighborhoods where HomeBase programs are working, their preventative services appear to be having a positive impact: Homelessness has declined more in those areas than in other neighborhoods in the city.

The program has not gone unnoticed: At the end of March, Harvard University cited it as one of the top 50 innovations in government in 2006 (in pdf format).

In a January conference call organized by the National Alliance to End Homelessness (listen here
), officials from the city's Department of Homeless Services said a variety of factors explained the success of the program. They lauded the community-based organizations for their grassroots links and local knowledge while also pointing to sophisticated information management technology that allows them to understand better where homeless people are coming from and why they end up at shelters.

“It’s not an exaggeration to say that we collect everything â€“ everything â€“ and it’s in that database,” one of the officials said.

The community-based organizations can then use that information to reach out to people most in need of help. They can even target specific buildings if a significant number of people have become homeless from those buildings and then visit the building to offer information and assistance, one official said.

One lesson from HomeBase is that people facing homelessness can avoid it by receiving services before they end up at homeless shelters. It’s an important lesson because using homeless shelters to deal with homelessness has been so expensive.

Another important lesson is that people facing housing problems often do not seek help. HomeBase centers' caseworkers, who expected a line out of their doors when their programs opened in September 2004, have taken to handing out flyers on the streets to find clients.

The HomeBase program has only served about 3,000 families, according to the city. They receive services specific to their situations â€“ caseworkers help them with everything from getting job training to resolving family problems to navigating the public benefits maze that so often ends up in an eviction because of bureaucratic errors.

The service providers know, too, that financial issues are a common denominator for many of the people facing homelessness. Rents have increased significantly in the city and that trend shows no signs of diminishing. The city tried to address that problem by launching its own rent subsidy program â€“ Housing Stability Plus â€“ a little over a year ago, but it has not turned out nearly as well.

Housing Stability Plus

At a national conference on homelessness last year, then Department of Homeless Services Commissioner Linda Gibbs told housing advocates that the city's rent subsidy program, Housing Stability Plus, would succeed with the help of friendly landlords.

"Maybe landlords won't act on evictions â€“ when the rents go down, they'll let it go," Gibbs said at the time. The comment was met with some incredulity by advocates in New York City.

A year later, according to a spokesman for the Department of Homeless Services, some 6,000 families have been moved to permanent housing thanks to Housing Stability Plus, and only one percent have ended up back in shelters.

Critics are skeptical. Yes, the subsidy helped the city move people out of city shelters; reducing the number of shelter residents looks good -- from a distance. Up close, though, critics see this as bottom line thinking, and consider Housing Stability Plus to be a mess.

“What we’re hearing is that people in shelters â€¦ are very afraid of” Housing Stability Plus, said Councilmember Gail Brewer who has helped develop some of the more innovative housing policies in the city in recent years. “It just doesn’t seem to be working.” The City Council has scheduled a hearing on the program for April 27.

A person at one agency that has dealt with the subsidy program told me that people who look at just the number of homeless people reported in city shelters might consider the city’s rent subsidy successful. The recent street homeless census numbers are not yet available as of this writing, but last year the city said the number of people seeking help at homeless shelters had declined by almost 10 percent.

But what, critics ask, does that really mean? Consider the case of Cynthia Green. She is living with her two children, a one-year-old and a five-year-old, in a South Bronx building that has almost 800 violations of the Housing Maintenance Code . She could not move into her apartment for two months after signing her lease because the apartment was being repaired.

“They haven’t done anything but they still want their rent money,” Green said. Green described a nightmarish apartment, with leaks, cracks, mice and lead paint.

And that's an apartment by a cooperating landlord. Some landlords are already turned off by the program, and have no interest in continuing it -- even before the subsidies go down by 20 percent.

“It’s the worst subsidy program yet,” said Anne Peek, a long-time broker who works across the city. “You can’t really get an answer from anyone, you’re just passed around...Most of the tenants are not really able to pay the 20 percent that’s required of them. And nobody seems to know what’s going to happen at the end of the fifth year."

Advocates said they would not give up on the city’s subsidy even if some landlords have. But they urged the city to fess up to the problems, and fix them.

Led by the Coalition for the Homeless, housing advocates have asked the city to address four

fundamental flaws:

- The 20 percent decrease in rent payments
- Rules requiring families to stay on welfare in order to receive the subsidy
- A lax approach to housing quality that has placed families in apartments with serious housing code violations
- No mechanism to address illegal payments that some tenants are making to landlords in order to convince the landlords to accept the subsidy

"If these flaws were addressed, it would be a very effective program," said Patrick Markee of the Coalition for the Homeless .

Housing Help Program

When Judge Fern Fisher, who oversees the city's housing courts as the administrative judge of the Civil Court of New York City , launched the Housing Help Program in collaboration with the United Way of New York City just over a year ago, advocates were hopeful. The program offers legal representation and social services at an infinitely logical place: housing court. Granted, it only covers one zip code, 10451, in the Bronx, but it was seen as an opportunity to make the point that homelessness, which often starts with a formal order of eviction from a housing court judge, can be prevented by providing tenants with legal representation, long a fundamental argument of housing advocates, including the organization I work for.

Simply put, housing court is too confusing and intimidating for tenants who do not obtain legal representation. And it's made much worse because it is so unfair: Landlords almost always have attorneys representing their interests. Landlords' attorneys frequently negotiate deals with tenants that are so favorable to landlords that tenants find themselves facing eviction very quickly.

But Judge Fisher downplayed the legal services aspect of the program she initiated.

"It's not a right-to-counsel project," she said. "You can't prevent homelessness without social services. Social workers are needed for these families."

Of 114 formal evictions that did occur in the 10451 zip code last year, Fisher noted that 42

occurred without any tenant ever responding to the landlord's petition for eviction at housing court. This high rate of defaults reinforces what the HomeBase programs appear to have learned, too: Many people who end up homeless never get any help of any kind.

"Our approach is to catch them at court, which is the natural place to find them," Fisher said. "But what can we do about people who don't come to court? Clearly they got evicted so that's serious.

"Those are people who either move out or they just sit around and they get evicted," she continued. "How do you reach them? How do you contact them? How do you get them to come to court?"

While Fisher insists her program is a social services one, it still demonstrated that legal representation is critical to avoiding eviction. None of the 330 families that received help were ultimately evicted and the fact is when tenants are represented they are much less likely to be evicted.

"Clients do in fact come in with not just a housing problem but a large number of associated problems based on the fact that they are poor," said Steven Telzak of Legal Services for New York-Bronx, which worked on the project at the court. The three-year project will continue without LSNY-Bronx for reasons that were unclear, but all involved said the parting of the ways was amicable.

"We're helping families â€" it works," said Jo Gonsalves, director of affordable housing and homelessness prevention at United Way of New York City. "Families are getting services. They don't have to advocate for themselves. There are social workers and paralegals advocating for them, in addition to the attorneys."

Gonsalves said, unsurprisingly, that poverty was the predominant cause of housing crises. But that did not mean other social services were not needed.

"There are also issues of trauma, mental health â€" social service issues â€" that are

compounded by lack of financial resources," she said, adding that the United Way hopes to expand the project.

But with economic issues obviously a fundamental factor in homelessness, Andy Scherer's musical chairs analogy of the New York City housing market in 2006 seems even more potent. A report now 20 years old, "Stemming the tide of displacement: Housing policies for preventing homelessness" might very well have been written last week. It said that to end homelessness efforts were needed to address affordability, gentrification, dispute resolution, abandonment and emergency social services.

"The emphasis of the policy has been too narrowly focused," Scherer said. "It's not like they're doing bad things â€" they're doing helpful things. But the problem will continue to persist until there's some real tackling of the broader reasons that lead to the lack of adequate housing."

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