

## EDITORIALS

# End game for homelessness

A new plan to end homelessness in Rhode Island is inspiring high hopes among advocates. If successful, it could turn the state into a national model for solving a problem long seen as intractable. Rhode Island's small scale makes it conceivable that such an effort could work.

Ending homelessness does not mean that people down on their luck will never lack, temporarily, for someplace to go. Rather, it prioritizes the more difficult cases. Once these populations are successfully managed, helping the temporarily homeless should become far easier.

Under the plan being considered, veterans would be the initial focus. Injuries and the stresses of war can make it difficult for some to resume civilian life. In Rhode Island, homeless veterans are estimated to number in the hundreds in any given year.

Next on the list are the chronically homeless: typically, people with multiple problems ranging from addiction to disabilities and other health issues. They are thought to make up roughly 10 percent of the state's homeless population, now estimated at about 4,000 people.

The new plan, written by New York-based consultants Housing Innovations, has set the ambitious goal of ending homelessness in 10 years, in part by constructing about 800 supportive housing units. The plan was unveiled at a meeting of the state's Housing Resources Commission recently, and faces further

refinement from the directors of state agencies. A public comment period will follow.

Unlike previous "top-down" efforts, the 10-year plan emerged from talks with an array of state agencies and organizations, many of which have first-hand knowledge of Rhode Island's homeless population, and supplied helpful data. Importantly, the plan embraces the "housing-first" principle, which increasingly (and with much success) has gained a foothold here. The principle rejects night-to-night shelters. It holds that providing stable housing before addressing people's problems is the wisest social investment. At vastly lower expense, it can keep people out of emergency rooms, hospitals and prisons, while providing the support services needed to improve.

Targeting the worst off should gradually free up resources, allowing the state to quickly shelter Rhode Islanders facing temporary homelessness, perhaps because of illness or unemployment.

So far the plan does not have a price tag. Advocates envision funding it through a combination of loans, including bond issues, and state and federal funds. The Housing Resources Commission would administer the plan, and move at a pace that matches the amount of money available. Rhode Islanders will want to hear more about the details, but the broad outlines of this proposal look positive.