

The Boston Globe recently, and quite astutely, highlighted the alarming problem of family homelessness in Massachusetts. In its June 24 reporting, “A Room to Call Home,” the paper confronted the uncomfortable reality that hundreds of families and thousands of children in our backyard go without adequate shelter and health care.

According to findings released this spring in “*America’s Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness*,” more than 17,500 children in Massachusetts experience homelessness annually. These kids are twice as likely to be victims of physical and mental trauma, and experience chronic health problems that range from emotional distress to asthma to inadequate dental care. They are twice as likely to repeat a grade in school, be expelled, or drop out. And today, one-third, or about 6,000 kids are not sure where they will find their next meal.

Massachusetts is not alone. *America’s Youngest Outcasts* found that 1 in 50 children nationwide experience homelessness each year. That’s 1.5 million kids annually. It is the greatest number of children enduring homelessness or on the brink since the Dust Bowl Era of the Great Depression.

The majority of homeless children reside in very few states. About 75 percent of America’s identified homeless children lived in 11 states during the 2005-2006 school-year. Texas ranked last, with neighboring states in the southeast also scoring poorly.

To its credit, New England is outperforming the rest of the country in efforts to combat the problem. Connecticut ranks first. New Hampshire is second. Massachusetts stands at eighth, and deserves acknowledgement for planning, programs, and infrastructure. The Commonwealth has a statewide interagency council and a plan to end homelessness.

Massachusetts has indeed been a leader in child health for years. The State Children’s Health Insurance Program, a federal initiative considered by many as essential to child health, started here. We also have the lowest rate of uninsured children in the nation.

Unfortunately, that’s no longer enough. The effects of the economic recession – including increasing numbers of foreclosures, job layoffs, rising food and fuel prices, and inadequate supplies of low-cost housing – will surely add to the legions of children who are homeless.

It is nearly impossible to reclaim the lost life of a child who grew up without a home, and society often feels the consequences for decades. Research suggests that fewer than 25 percent of the roughly 2,500 homeless high school students in Massachusetts will graduate. Massachusetts, as a result, will lose approximately \$240 million in societal contributions over their lifetime.

In an era when political leaders struggle with very difficult decisions about the services government can provide, they must remember a silent population of homeless children in their backyard. Elected officials should be mindful of the moral and practical reasons for

investing in these children, and they must find ways to prioritize programs and infrastructure.

Ending child homelessness is realistic. It is within our reach, even in these tough times, and Massachusetts should be leading the way.

There's a role for each of us, so please get involved. If you can give, please give to a local homelessness organization. If you can volunteer, please donate your time and talents at a shelter in your community. And, if you interact with your elected officials, please remind them that cuts impacting programs for children and their families on the brink of homelessness cost us all more in the long run.

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