

# The Free Press

## Our View: Housing | Legislature must step up for homeless

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Minnesota legislators would do well to make significant investments in affordable housing and solving homelessness as they consider options for use of the state's \$9.3 billion budget surplus.

We have to think big and act big. Approving everything the Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless requested would amount to using about 5% of the surplus, and much of the request would build housing and fund programs for multiple years.

The Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless includes 100 member organizations statewide and the Homes for All organization includes

endorsements from 270 groups, showing that there is widespread support across the state to address homelessness and affordable housing. From the New Ulm Economic Development Authority to Partners for Housing and Connections Shelter in Mankato, local groups support and will benefit from approval of the housing agenda.

Some 50,000 people in Minnesota experience homelessness in a year, according to the groups. Homeless shelters are so sparse, people sometimes have to drive 100 miles to find one. The group has proposed establishing 50 new shelters in the state at a cost of \$114 million. More than half of those would be in outstate Minnesota.

The state has never had a statewide capital program for homeless shelters, and it's far past time one is established. Those shelters also need operational funding support. During the pandemic, such funding was increased from \$900,000 to \$6 million showing the great need.

The groups propose \$95 million over the next three years to fund the Emergency Services Program that allows local groups and organizations to meet needs of the homeless through funding for operations and staffing of homeless shelters and other support services. That funding would help support the Connections Shelter established by Mankato churches five years ago.

Transitional housing is key to ending homelessness, and local groups like Partners for Housing were able to expand their staff from one to three with pandemic funding and from 15 to 45 clients. But the pandemic funding will

end in September and even with the increased client base, the local transitional program is only serving 30% of the need.

The homeless coalition is proposing \$9 million in funding for the transitional housing program, or about 0.1% of the budget surplus.

Mankato organizations have made great strides in raising community awareness of a significant local homeless problem and have begun addressing it. An in-depth series by The Free Press in 2019 showed a great need, and a story this year showed the need has not abated.

A Free Press report in Feb. 2021 showed average stays at Partners housing units increased to 79 days from 63 the year before the pandemic. Connections had housed 100 individuals midway through its 2020-21 season, a number more than double past years.

The 35-bed Connections shelter had up to 30 people on the waiting list in its peak months of December and January this year.

The biggest piece of the coalition's request to the Legislature calls for \$400 million in housing bonds to help build affordable housing and \$100 million in general obligation bonds to rehabilitate current public housing.

That would far exceed allocations in past years of about \$100 million, but again, no one is arguing the need is not there.

Having a roof over one's head helps solve huge social and economic problems that are a significant cost to the state, including costs for public health

service. Stable housing helps the homeless get a stable job and work toward self-sufficiency.

There are few other investments a state can make to address those immediate and humanitarian needs.

We urge Minnesotans to talk to their legislators on where they stand on the housing coalition proposals, and we urge legislators to approve a significant housing agenda this year.