

How can the state alleviate the problem of hotel rooms becoming housing for homeless families?

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It all started one cold day a few years ago. The shelters were full and a mother and two children needed a place to stay. The young mother and younger children had nowhere else to go and needed to be removed from an abusive situation. They were at the end of the line with nowhere else to go but the streets. Going from a bad situation to a terrible situation seemed like the only option.

An industrious caseworker picked up a phone and called a hotel. The hotel owner took this family in off the streets and they had a place to stay. That night, a new system was born. Another lining in the safety net under the bottom rung of the ladder. Using hotels as transitional housing put another tool in the toolbox for social workers tasked to find housing for people that have no place to go.

Small families, who are, otherwise, homeless, occupy over 2,000 hotel rooms in Massachusetts. The waiting list is as long and getting longer. The state has successfully removed these children from an atmosphere of drugs and violence and given them a temporary place that is safe and secure as they work to place them in more permanent housing.

Some politicians make noise about cutting out these programs. "How can we afford to put people up in hotels!" they ask. "These programs have to be cut out"; "Something has to be done!" "We need to do something!" No disrespect to the owners of these hotels, but we're not talking about Disney World. We're talking Brockton, Worcester, Holyoke, Danvers, Peabody and many other cities and towns across the commonwealth. These people aren't lounging by the pool soaking up the sun. Have you ever tried to put everything you owned in a hotel room closet? There is no cooking in the rooms. No one is sitting at a kitchen table having dinner. These kids just can't go outside and play. The hotel is next to a highway. There is no grass; it's a parking lot.

As I drive through Boston, along Rte. 128 and I-495, I see condos and apartments going up all over the place. A flock of cranes in the Seaport District, office buildings, hotels, retail "lifestyle centers", hospital expansion and college campuses being rejuvenated are all in the process of completion. But I don't see any housing for the homeless being built. I don't see subsidized housing projects under construction. The "something" that has to be done is new construction of housing. Homes for those without them. Hotel rooms are the stopgap. They are supposed to be transitional. But the average length of stay is nine months.

At 2,000 hotel rooms, it costs the state over \$65 million per year for these programs. That money needs to be directed towards construction of affordable and subsidized housing. We have people in Massachusetts working to prepare a bid for Boston to host the Olympics. Russia has just spent \$4 billion to host the twelve days of the 2014 Sochi Olympics. More than the cost of the other entire Olympics' combined.

The "something" that these politicians need to get behind is the construction of 2,000 affordable housing units. Instead of the energy expended trying to create housing for Olympic athletes from

across the world, let's figure out how to house those that live amongst us every day. They don't need luxury with waterfront views. But they do need a stove to cook on, a laundry to wash clothes and maybe a desk and a chair where a kid can do homework. Let's get these people off the bottom and up a few rungs of that ladder.

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