

Campaign targets homelessness

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By JACK FLYNN

jflynn@repub.com

The president of Westfield State College and a prominent Springfield business leader have been selected to lead a campaign against homelessness in the Pioneer Valley.

Evan S. Dobbelle, who took over at Westfield State last year, and Lynne D. Wallace, vice president, Dietz & Company Architects, Inc., will oversee a new initiative by the Leadership Council for Western Mass. of Network to End Homelessness.

The council, composed of elected officials, members of the private sector and social service groups, is working with the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission to find new alternatives to emergency shelters.

The council elected Dobbelle as chairman and Wallace as vice chair at its last meeting.

"I hope we can galvanize public opinion to understand that someone who is homeless is not a stereotypical panhandler," Dobbelle said.

The planning commission received a \$1.1 million grant in December, part of \$8 million distributed by the Patrick administration statewide to expand non-shelter housing options.

Dobbelle said the group's mission will be to define the scope and nature of the problem in Springfield, Chicopee, Holyoke, Northampton and suburban communities.

Dobbelle said he was particularly struck by a conversation he had with Springfield Superintendent of Schools Alan J. Ingram.

"He said there were 1,500 children who were homeless" in the city school system, said Dobbelle. "They were children who went to school every day not knowing where they were going to sleep that night."

Geraldine McCafferty, deputy director of Springfield's Office of Housing, said the city attracts homeless individuals and families because other communities lack programs.

McCafferty said Springfield and other communities have been working on so-called diversion programs designed to keep homeless families out of shelters by keeping them in their homes or finding apartments or other short-term housing options.

The \$1.1 million grant came as the state cut funding to several local shelters, including the Jefferson Avenue Family Shelter in Springfield and the Broderick House and Main Street shelters in Holyoke.

A study last fall found that Springfield had about 1,200 homeless people, and 500 families, during the previous year.

About 20 percent are considered chronically homeless, while the rest were "crisis homeless," meaning they lost housing after losing jobs, suffering an illness, or other unforeseen problems, the report by the Homes Within Reach Committee found.

Wallace said eliminating emergency shelters is a long-term goal. "It would be nice to say shelters are no longer needed, but the reality is it will not happen tomorrow," she said.

"We're trying to prevent homelessness from happening by rapidly rehousing people and stabilizing at risk households," Wallace added.

"Sometimes, it could be something as simple as a rent arrangement or a utility payment," she said.

In addition to Dobelle, Wallace and McCafferty, the council has 20 members and is recruiting more.

So far, the group includes Robert Fleishner, a lawyer for the Northampton-based Center for Public Representation; Stephen C. Huntley, executive director of the Valley Opportunity Council; Robert G. Fields, a judge in Western Housing Court in Springfield; Lori J. Ingraham, an Easthampton School Committee member; David C. Gadaire, executive director of CareerPoint in Holyoke; Peg Keller, city planner in Northampton; homeless advocate Charles E. Knight, of Springfield and Michael Konig, a professor at Westfield State College.