

Framingham: Baker announces youth homelessness initiative

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Gov. Charlie Baker announced a new initiative to take on youth homelessness at Framingham State University. FSU and MassBay are participating campuses, among other schools.

FRAMINGHAM – Twenty-year-old Gabriel found it difficult to juggle college studies with homelessness and came “very close to giving up.”

Thanks to a new program he’s studying information systems technology & management at MassBay Community College and living at Framingham State University.

“It was hard to focus on school when there were other external factors,” said Gabriel. Now I don’t have to worry about not having a place to sleep. I’m focusing on the only thing I should be focusing on. I’m able to get three meals a day, which is awesome.”

Gabriel, who asked that his full name not be published, is one of the students selected to participate in the Massachusetts Student Housing Security Pilot, a new program that launched at four residential campuses this year. At a press conference Thursday at Framingham State, Gov. Charlie Baker introduced the plan to provide dorm rooms to homeless students attending community college.

The pilot is funded by a grant from the Massachusetts Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth. Participating campuses include Framingham State, MassBay, Worcester State University and Quinsigamond Community College.

Before the press conference, Baker and Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito spoke with students to learn more about their personal experiences.

“The biggest thing I would say is the amount of resilience these kids have shown on their own, in many cases, is extraordinary,” Baker said. I just want to say how grateful I am that they can tell these stories and do it in a way that shows no regret, no anger, no hostility, but with the ability to say, ‘Hey, this is what happened, this is how I dealt with it, and now I’m trying to figure out the path forward,’” said Baker.

A 2017 HOPE Lab survey administered at 24 public colleges and universities in the state found that 13 percent of community college students and 10 percent of state university and University of Massachusetts students said they became homeless in the past year, including one-quarter of

all students transitioning out of foster care. Even greater percentages of students said they had experienced housing insecurity, such as the risk of eviction or hunger.

In Massachusetts, it is estimated that there are at least 1,800 young adults every year who experience homelessness.

Marylou Sudders, Secretary of Health & Human Services, said homeless youth, a transient population, are difficult to survey and that there will be more efforts in the future.

“When you conduct a survey, we assume it’s under-reported. These are baseline numbers. The only way we can fine-tune these numbers is by continuing to survey,” said Sudders.

To be eligible for the housing security program, students must be 25 or younger, enrolled full time in a public college or university participating in the pilot program, degree-seeking and in good academic standing.

Campuses will be reimbursed by the state for the cost of the dorm bed occupancy for an 18-month period, for the remainder of fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2020 including all summer and semester breaks. Campuses will cover the cost of providing meals and snacks for students, with support from local service providers where available.

The state also announced \$3 million in funding to 10 community partners throughout the state to help youth and young adults with support to help prevent or end homelessness. South Middlesex Opportunity Council, Bridge over Troubled Waters, and L.U.K. Crisis Center were among the community partners chosen.

Baker called the programs a “very different kind of approach” to taking on youth homelessness.

“When you’re talking about young people, you have to think much more broadly and much more creatively and much more expansively,” said Baker. “The model that’s been developed in this state-wide effort is very consistent with the circumstances and situations that young people find themselves in.”