

State pilot program gives housing to homeless college students

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In Terry Vecchio's first month as dean of students at Quinsigamond Community College in Worcester, a student told Vecchio she was living with her husband and children in a car.

The student was not unique.

A 2017 survey by the organization HOPE Lab found that 13 percent of Massachusetts community college students and 10 percent of state university students became homeless in the last year. A number of them were students transitioning out of foster care.

Linn Torto, executive director of the Massachusetts Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness and chairwoman of a state commission on unaccompanied homeless youth, said students who do not have enough money for housing in many cases are unable to finish school.

"Those kids are going to drop out," Torto said.

Gov. Charlie Baker on Thursday announced a pilot program in which the state will pay for housing for 20 homeless students who attend community colleges or state universities, including five students in Worcester.

"We are hopeful this housing pilot will provide a stable place for students to live so they can thrive academically, obtain their degrees, and change their lives," Education Secretary James Peysers said in a statement.

The pilot program targets full-time degree students under age 25 who are going to school in Bridgewater, Lowell, Framingham and Worcester. Each area has a partnership between a community college, a public university and a social service agency.

In Worcester, the program involves Worcester State University and Quinsigamond Community College, working with L.U.K. Crisis Center.

Five students in each city who attend either the community college or the university will receive free university housing, paid for by the state at a total cost of \$120,000. The schools will pay for students' meals. The Massachusetts Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth will give grants to the social service agency to provide services such as counseling, transportation vouchers and job hunting before graduation.

Torto said the goal is to help these students graduate and ultimately find jobs and stable housing. “We’re losing a group of young people ... who but for a stable housing situation, they would continue with their education and graduate,” Torto said.

Torto said one recent survey identified 738 unaccompanied homeless youth in Massachusetts, but she believes there are actually between 1,800 and 3,000 homeless young people. She said it is hard to count homeless youth because many do not think of themselves as homeless. They may be couch surfing with friends or relatives and moving between housing situations.

Vecchio said one participant from Quinsigamond Community College is studying biology and chemistry, with plans to get a nursing degree. He was going to drop out this semester because he did not have money to pay for both housing and school.

Another student had been living in a house while her father fixed it up, but when he died, the house was condemned.

“It’s a population we don’t assume are homeless because they’re college students,” Vecchio said.

The state is applying for federal money to expand the program to more students.