

Worcester State, QCC team up to provide housing for homeless students

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FRAMINGHAM – Equipped with a new grant from the state, Worcester State University and Quinsigamond Community College have partnered to provide housing and meals to homeless students on both campuses.

Worcester's Student Housing Security Pilot is one of four such homeless lodging programs launching at public colleges and universities this year that were announced by Gov. Charlie Baker at an event Thursday at Framingham State University. The governor said his administration also has awarded \$3 million in grants to 10 community organizations across the state to provide a range of services to homeless youth in their regions.

The initiative was prompted in part by mounting evidence of widespread hunger and homelessness at the state's universities and community colleges. A recent survey of Massachusetts public college students, released a year ago by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab, found that at community colleges specifically, nearly two-thirds of students reported being unable to secure regular meals or housing.

At Thursday's news conference, Mr. Baker said many of those students are succeeding despite their difficult circumstances, but they need help.

"There are a lot of special individuals involved in this," he said. "We need to figure out how to get them to the next act."

The campus housing program will help by reserving up to five free beds at each of the participating four-year universities for homeless students. Worcester State and Quinsigamond already have identified the students to reach that cap – two are at the state university while the other three are at the community college – and are setting them up in their new dorm rooms.

Dilon Mastrorio, a student at Quinsigamond Community College who is studying to become a nurse, is one of them, and on Thursday he said he had just moved into his unit at Worcester State. Mr. Mastrorio, who went to high school in Auburn, said he has been homeless since age 16, a situation that made it difficult for him to do well in school.

"I had to focus on sleeping, eating and staying warm. School wasn't always a concern," he said, adding that the option of housing at Worcester State came just in time. "I was just about ready to drop out (of QCC) to find a place to live."

Mr. Baker said there may be 500 to 1,000 young people in the state like Mr. Mastrorio, who has had to rely on couch-surfing to find places to live while attending college. But the governor and other state officials said existing estimates of the number of homeless students are probably underreporting the extent of the problem.

Some students may be like Marylou Sudders, now the state's Secretary of Health and Human Services, who said she was an "emancipated minor" in college, but likely wouldn't have reported herself as being homeless. But without reliable housing at the time, she said, she was essentially in the same position as today's homeless youth.

"I learned the art of couch-surfing, borrowing people's cars to stay in, and working in food services so I'd always have something to eat," she said, adding that one of her biggest problems was finding a place to stay when her campus – and its dorms – shut down for holiday breaks.

In addition to providing lodging for homeless students, the Worcester campus housing pilot will also give them free meals, according to Quinsigamond's president, Luis Pedraja. He said the two schools are splitting the costs, which are not entirely covered by their roughly \$130,000 grant – Worcester State is waiving some fees for the students, while the community college is paying for its students' food – after having discussed the idea to tackle the homeless issue even before the state grant came into play.

That funding was "the catalyst" for the project, Mr. Pedraja said, adding, "We hope this is the start of something that will be expanded greatly" in the future.

The rest of the grant funding coming to the region through the initiative, meanwhile, will be spent by the LUK Crisis Center, which received a \$325,000 award. That will help the social service agency expand its services to homeless young people older than 22, according to Maurie Bergeron, LUK's director of transition to independent living services. She said a big benefit of the state funding is that it doesn't come with many restrictions.

"The flexibility of the funding allows us to do more with it," she said, adding that LUK helps homeless youth with everything from housing, nutrition and employment services to providing them with new sheets for their beds.