

# The Boston Globe

## CAMPAIGN 2002 / CAMPAIGN ISSUES; CANDIDATES LARGELY IGNORED POVERTY, ACTIVISTS SAY DWINDLING SHELTER BEDS, MEDICAID CITED

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They're calling it the campaign's "stealth issue."

Rising poverty is not part of many stump speeches. There are few, if any, position papers about it on the Web sites of the two major-party gubernatorial candidates. And though more than half a million state residents are mired in it, the candidates have rarely mentioned the word.

As the economy continues to sputter and the state suffers a cash crunch, poverty issues (which advocates define as homelessness, hunger, and welfare) will be among the most pressing matters to confront the next governor.

About 575,000 residents live below the federal poverty line. More than 55,000 people, many of them with families, became homeless last year and an increasing number of residents are seeking shelter beds. The number of families on welfare is 48,000, 14 percent higher than last year. Food banks around the state are reporting a surge in demand, and 1 of every 5 children in the state lives below the poverty line, just \$18,100 a year for a family of four.

"It's not unusual that the needs of the extremely low-income aren't an issue," said Mary Ellen Hombs, executive director of the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance. "But this year it should be unusual."

The candidates deny ignoring poverty issues, noting that they have spoken about creating jobs, reducing health care costs, and building more affordable housing. But advocates say they haven't addressed key issues vital to the poor, who make up 10 to

30 percent of the state's population, depending on the standard.

The Globe put questions to the candidates about poverty and each had a different take on how to tackle everything from homelessness to welfare reform.

"Perhaps there is nothing that demonstrates how wrong our state's priorities currently are than the decision by Beacon Hill this year to focus budget cuts on the homeless," said Republican Mitt Romney, adding that he would curb homelessness in part by reducing domestic violence.

Democrat Shannon O'Brien supports counting education and training toward future work requirements for welfare recipients. Jill Stein, the Green Party candidate, supports helping the poor pay their rent. Independent Barbara Johnson said she would replace the federal poverty line with a more detailed measure of poverty. And Libertarian Carla Howell said the key to ending poverty is ending the income tax and encouraging charity.

All this comes as the Legislature has removed funding for 328 beds at homeless shelters, closed multiple welfare offices, and reduced the number of caseworkers. Meanwhile, the number of uninsured residents rose to above 400,000, and lawmakers removed 50,000 chronically unemployed people from the Medicaid rolls.

Some of the cuts, advocates say, may result in higher costs for the state. For example, rather than building more shelters or other temporary housing for the homeless, the state has spent millions of dollars putting families in hotels. Now, with shelters full, the state is paying an average of \$100 per family, per night to put 550

families in hotels. Two years ago, 90 families needed that help.

The state also cut a \$9 million program that helped the poor pay rent. Many cut off from rental assistance have been evicted from their apartments, adding to the homeless numbers.

Advocates point to \$8 million the state is spending this year to provide emergency food to the poor as an example of waste. The expense would be unnecessary if the state prodded more eligible residents to apply for food stamps, a federally subsidized program. Today, only 48 percent of the half-million people eligible for food stamps get them.

"Shouldn't we at least be talking more about maximizing our federal money?" said Ellen Parker, executive director of Project Bread. "It's a huge loss. This is money that would feed people - and it would cost the state nothing."

Another issue so far unaddressed, advocates say, is whether the state should continue to use the federal poverty line, \$18,100 for a family of four, as the threshold for government aid. Many advocates and lawmakers consider the 40-year-old federal benchmark an outdated measure that doesn't account for the specific costs of living in certain areas.

Last year, Acting Governor Jane Swift vetoed a bill that would have replaced the federal criteria the so-called self-sufficiency standard, which measures costs of housing, transportation, and health care, among other factors, in a specific area. Using the self-sufficiency standard, for example, a family of four would be considered impoverished if it

earned less than \$43,000 in Boston or \$34,000 in North Adams.

"We've been trying to get this onto the candidates' campaign agendas," said Mary Lassen, president of the Women's Educational and Industrial Union, which lobbied the Legislature to approve the self-sufficiency standard. "But it hasn't picked up steam."

Neither has a discussion of welfare reform.

This year, as the nation's landmark welfare reforms expired, Congress has debated how best to refine the law, which has cut welfare rolls in Massachusetts and other states in half.

For the Commonwealth, the changes in federal law could be drastic. Nearly all the current proposals suggest increasing the number of people required to work. With only 7 percent of all state welfare recipients working today, far below proposals for 50 to 70 percent to work, advocates and employees of the state welfare agency say they were expecting more of a debate on how Massachusetts would adapt.

"We're heading into a critical period, and I haven't heard the topic come up," said Dick Powers, a spokesman for the Department of Transitional Assistance, which oversees the state's welfare programs. "With more people coming to see us for services and fewer resources to help them, the next governor and Legislature are going to have to make some dramatic changes to our state laws."

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