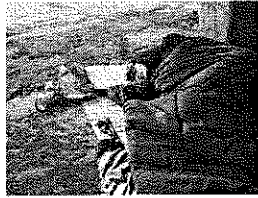


# Homeless advocates to Wisconsin lawmakers: 'We don't really even have a plan.'

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(Photo: Getty Images)

MADISON - Wisconsin shouldn't settle for seeing its citizens sleep beneath bridges or in cars or storage units, advocates told lawmakers Tuesday.

Carrie Poser, who directs a nonprofit dealing with homelessness, told of seeing people sleeping along the Chippewa River around Eau Claire.

"It's an eye-opening experience to walk up to a cave and see a guy sleeping there. It's not OK. ... There has to be a way. We're better than that as a society," she said.

State officials are taking aim at homelessness with a series of bills that had a hearing Tuesday in the Assembly Committee on Public Benefit Reform. Poser, who works with the Wisconsin Balance of State Continuum of Care, said the bills would be a good first step to "change the landscape of homelessness in Wisconsin."

From veterans to children, tens of thousands of Wisconsin residents experience homelessness every year. But the state has done little to coordinate its response to the problem or develop measures to track progress since a neglected 2007 plan by then Gov. Jim Doyle's administration, advocate Joseph Volk said.

"We don't really even have a plan," said Volk, executive director of the Wisconsin Coalition Against Homelessness.

In 2016, nearly 27,000 people received homeless services in Wisconsin, according to the Institute for Community Alliances, which used data from most but not all of the homeless projects in the state. That was similar to the number each year since 2012 but many more than the 21,310 who were served in 2008, at the beginning of the last recession.

Those numbers also fail to capture the full extent of the problem. The data, for instance, didn't include women living in domestic violence shelters or people living with friends and family who hadn't sought help.

GOP Gov. Scott Walker's budget includes several provisions to help address the problem. In addition, lawmakers are offering a series of additional fixes, including a proposal to create an umbrella council to coordinate the state's response to homelessness.

The coordinating council bill is co-sponsored by Assembly Majority Leader Jim Steineke (R-Kaukauna) and would bring together eight agencies to target homelessness. It would likely be chaired by Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch, who helped to get several of the proposals into Walker's budget. Under [Assembly Bill 234](#), the council would have a director making up to \$95,000 a year.

"To us this is just a step," Steineke said. "We aren't pretending we're going to solve the homeless problem overnight."

Other bills would:

- Provide more flexibility in how grants from the Department of Administration could be used to provide housing for those in need. [Assembly Bill 235](#) would also soften rules dictating how much money is spent in each region of the state, which some advocates say would make it easier to track the flow of transient individuals and families.
- Let the state's housing authority prioritize the chronically homeless with its programs. [Assembly Bill 236](#) would also allow the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority to provide case management to those individuals and families.
- Award a \$75,000 pilot grant to a single city to connect homeless individuals with jobs. The city would have to contribute at least \$50,000 in matching dollars to receive the grant and would preferably work with a local nonprofit to implement it, under [Assembly Bill 237](#)

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Rep. Lisa Subeck (D-Madison), a former nonprofit director, said she generally agreed with the bills but questioned whether their benefits would fall short.

"My biggest concern is this just isn't enough," Subeck said.

Volk, the homeless advocate, told Subeck the state could do more to prevent homelessness. The state could award small grants to help families who have steady income but who have fallen behind in rent by a month or two because of a sudden expense or illness, he said.

An \$800 grant to a family in crisis could save them from losing their furniture and belongings, keep the children from having to change schools and prevent taxpayers from having to making costlier interventions, he said.

"It just makes so much more sense," Volk said.