

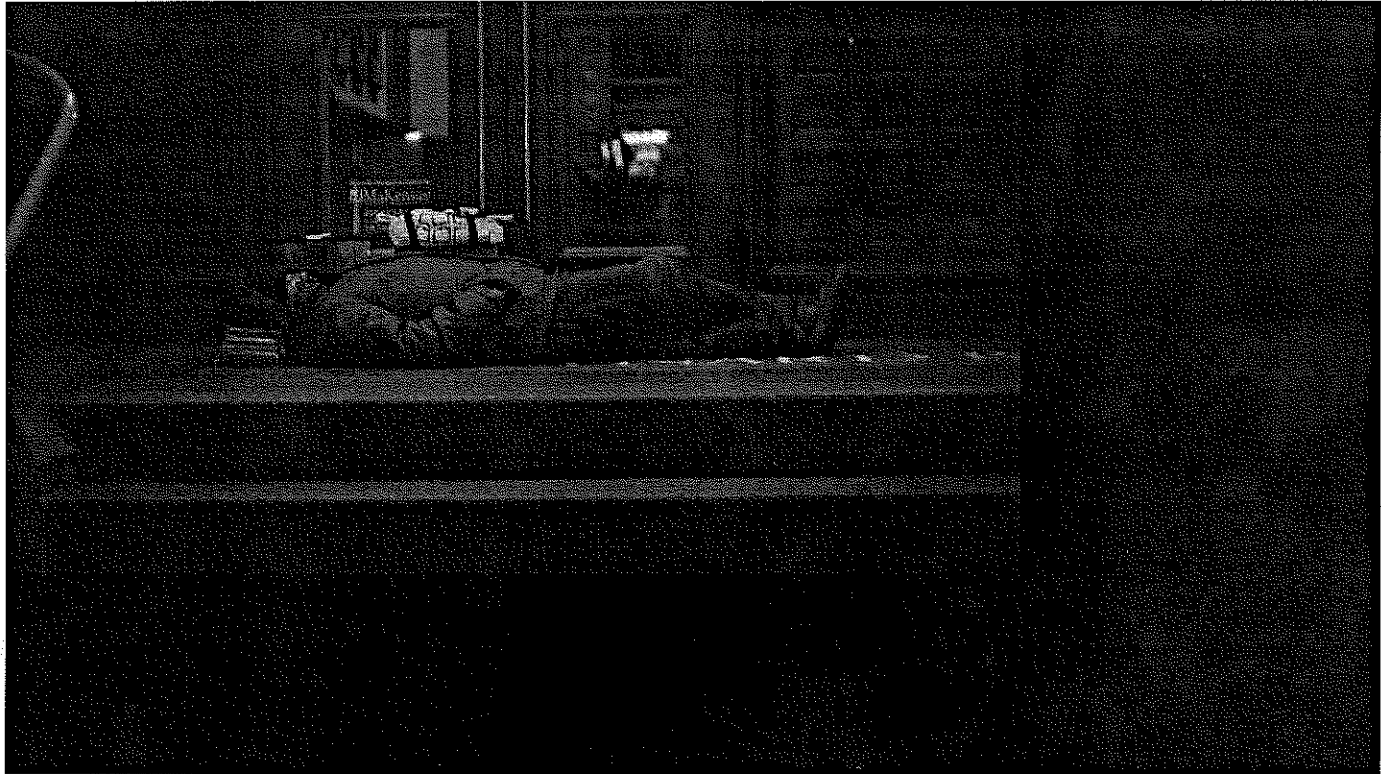
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Housing Advocates Applaud New Initiatives To Combat Homelessness In Wisconsin

Some Advocates Say Bills Targeting Homelessness Have Been A Long Time Coming
By Haleema Shah

After a unanimous vote, the state's Joint Finance Committee passed two bills this week aimed at combating [homelessness in Wisconsin](#) [2]. The bills, introduced by Republican lawmakers, have already garnered positive responses from housing advocates.

Joe Volk, executive director of the Wisconsin Coalition Against Homelessness, said it has been decades since the state decided to spend more on efforts to combat homelessness.

"I've been involved in this issue for a very long time, and this is the first time in about 25 years that any

new resources have been proposed at the state level," he said.

One bill would create an Interagency Council on Homelessness that would include eight secretaries from state agencies receiving funding to tackle homelessness as well as other representatives from other groups dealing with the issue in Wisconsin.

The formation of the council is a step in the right direction, said Carrie Poser, director of the nonprofit Wisconsin Balance of State Continuum of Care.

She said one of the benefits of the council will be that state players who sign off on measures to address homelessness will be sitting at the same table as people who are working in communities.

"I think that's a fantastic step," Poser said. "It certainly doesn't provide funding right now to a shelter providing homeless services, but if we don't bring all the people to the table ... then we're going to fund different things in silos and we're not going to make some significant landscape change."

The second bill passed by the budget committee would make \$75,000 available to a municipality to pilot a program to help people facing homelessness find jobs. The bill is modeled after the "Better Way" program out of Albuquerque, New Mexico, which offers people without homes with work cleaning up public spaces.

But Poser said there are areas where she doesn't believe the legislation goes far enough. She said more money needs to go into permanent supportive housing, case management and rapid rehousing funding. She also emphasized the need for measures that prevent someone from becoming homeless in the first place.

"There isn't significant prevention funding available anywhere," she said, adding that finding ways to aid someone before they become homeless instead of after can be tricky. But she said legislation should be able to "better earmark and understand what creates a situation in which someone would actually become homeless and then ... intervene in an effective way that promotes ongoing housing stability."

Some Democratic lawmakers said earlier this month the bills did not go far enough [3].

"It's appalling that these cosmetic solutions are the best Republicans can muster to address Wisconsin's homelessness epidemic," said Rep. Melissa Sargent, D-Madison, in a statement.

Another Madison Democrat, Rep. Lisa Subeck, echoed that sentiment.

"People with no place to sleep tonight don't have time to wait for a bureaucratic council or pilot program," Subeck said.

The bills still await approval from the full state Legislature, and while Volk said he doesn't expect a budget to be approved before June or July, he was still hopeful some of the new efforts to deal with homelessness would start to go into effect this year.

"We would hope that by late summer or early fall some of these new dollars and new initiatives — including the interagency council starting to meet — would hit the street and start making things better for people in Wisconsin that don't have a home."

Editor's Note: WPR's Laurel White contributed to this report.

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