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State Democratic lawmakers cool to GOP proposals to address homelessness

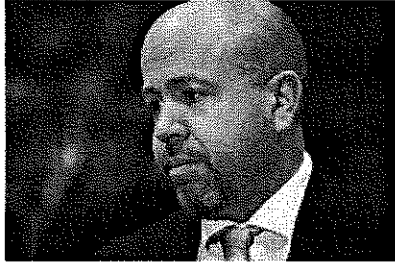
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State Democratic lawmakers are giving a cool response to GOP-sponsored legislation announced Wednesday to fight



Sargent



Steineke

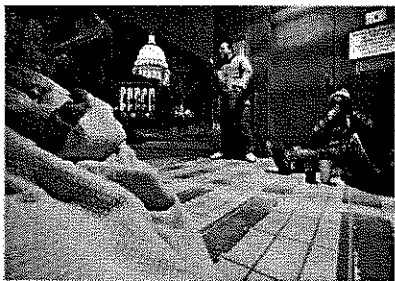
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Editorial: Pass bills for homeless, then do more

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GOP lawmakers offer legislation to address homelessness, including key council

Salvation Army, partners creating new housing opportunities for the homeless

homelessness in Wisconsin, saying proposals don't do enough to deliver needed housing, social services and eviction prevention.

Rep. Melissa Sargent, D-Madison, who last session introduced proposals to address youth homelessness that went nowhere in the Republican-controlled Legislature, described the GOP package as "feel-good, cosmetic solutions" that won't "change the lives of families on the street right now."

Democrats also allege Republicans, through policies on health care, renters rights, human services and a minimum wage, have made it harder for struggling people to keep their housing.

"(Gov. Scott) Walker and the Republicans have only made it more difficult for Wisconsinites to avoid homelessness by making health care more expensive, stripping away the rights of renters, and not properly funding critical human services," said Assembly Minority Leader Peter Barca, D-Kenosha. "We support any effort to lift individuals out of homelessness. ... Clearly, these bills don't go far enough."

Senate Minority Leader Jennifer Shilling, D-La Crosse, said, "Democrats are committed to raising family wages, expanding access to affordable health care and restoring tenant rights so citizens have greater financial and housing security."

Assembly Majority Leader Jim Steineke, R-Kaukauna, who introduced the GOP package, said, "Obviously, it's a little sad to see this kind of partisan tack on what should be a bipartisan issue. It's not the silver bullet, but it's a much better step than we've taken in the last two decades. What did the Democrats do when they were in charge?"

Key advocate 'very pleased' by Scott Walker proposals to address homelessness

Madison advances on ending homelessness for veterans

Speakers support GOP homelessness bills at hearing

State Assembly committee passes package of GOP bills to address homelessness

GOP homelessness bills pass Legislature's finance committee

The legislative package would provide new structure to state efforts to reduce and end homelessness, adjust some current programs and test new approaches.

The centerpiece bill would create an Interagency Council on Homelessness to be chaired by the governor's designee — the first to be Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch — and containing the secretaries of eight agencies that get homelessness funding. It designates a new director of the council in the Department of Administration to coordinate council policy and practices.

The other bills largely echo and support fiscal proposals in Walker's proposed 2017-19 budget, now under review by the Legislature.

"I just don't think that is enough," said Rep. Lisa Subeck, D-Madison, who wants to raise the minimum wage and create more housing and fears Republicans will use more limited proposals to "check homelessness off their list" without truly addressing needs.

A key state advocate for the homeless, who applauded the legislation and called the interagency council a top priority, said Democrats must consider the package in the context of funding initiatives in Walker's proposed budget released in early February.

"I think there may be some confusion," said Joseph Volk, executive director of the Wisconsin Coalition to End Homelessness, and a self-described Milwaukee Democrat.

"The fiscal part wasn't really showcased today," he said.

Walker's budget would:

- Provide \$1 million over the biennium to homeless shelters to

deliver case management for homeless families.

- Deliver a \$150,000 matching grant over two years for a municipality to initiate a pilot program that deploys a van to pick up homeless people and pay them to clean up public places.
- Authorize the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority to pilot a prioritization of federal housing vouchers to chronically homeless people on the voucher waiting list and provide case management to those who get them.
- Provide \$1.3 million over the biennium to expand a program that serves mentally ill inmates being released from prison.
- Amend the state's transitional housing statute to create flexibility for grant funds to support homelessness prevention and rapid rehousing.
- Create a homeless services coordinator to work with agencies and municipalities to develop a waiver to use Medicaid funds for intensive case management for homeless people.

“Is that enough to solve the problem? No,” Volk said.

“Would I like to see more of an investment? Of course.

“But the way to get this done is not to start a partisan war. It's time for Democrats to put away their swords and come to the table,” Volk said.

Dean Mosiman | Wisconsin State Journal

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