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OUR VIEW: Community effort gives homeless shelter from the cold

The arctic temperatures plaguing Greater Fall River and much of the country in recent weeks have underscored the plight of the homeless and the need for a permanent emergency shelter for the growing ranks of people without a place to call home. With the First Step Inn able to accommodate only 20 people and a temporary emer...



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Posted Jan. 7, 2014 @ 12:01 am
Jan 7, 2014 at 7:23 AM

The arctic temperatures plaguing Greater Fall River and much of the country in recent weeks have underscored the plight of the homeless and the need for a permanent emergency shelter for the growing ranks of people without a place to call home. With the First Step Inn able to accommodate only 20 people and a temporary emergency shelter at the First Baptist Church holding 15, there is more need than there is space for the area's homeless.

Fortunately, local churches have been able, for the past few years, to piece together an emergency shelter system staffed by volunteers at area churches to get Fall River's homeless out of the cold. But this is a temporary Band-Aid, rather than a long-term solution.

The tough economy producing few jobs, the increasing costs of living and cuts to federal government assistance programs have created a perfect storm, resulting in a growing number of homeless individuals and increasingly, families.

Homelessness does not affect just the stereotypical loner with a substance abuse problem. In fact, the average age of a homeless person today is 8 years old, according to the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. A 2012 report found that there were 110 homeless families in the SouthCoast region and 806 homeless individuals, more than 175 of them "chronically homeless."

According to Fall River Mayor Will Flanagan, a more permanent strategy to address Fall River's homelessness crisis has begun to take shape. Plans are under way for a \$1.5 million, 50-bed permanent homeless shelter in the city to house homeless families and individuals, and provide social services to help them get back on their feet. And it's an initiative that's not being funded by government programs, but through private charitable contributions.

The homeless shelter proposal, developed by the Task Force on Homelessness, is to purchase the former Haddad Electronic Supply Co. at 138 Durfee St. It would be purchased for Steppingstone, the social services agency which operates the First Step Inn, completely through charitable donations.



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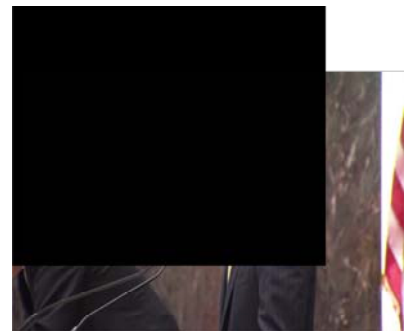
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BayCoast Bank CEO Nicholas Christ is the chairman of the task force. According to Flanagan, the community bank has committed to purchase the building, with a fundraising campaign to follow. Christ has proven to be a masterful fundraiser for various community projects, so he would seem to be the right man for the job.

Fall River is fortunate to have the commitment of BayCoast Bank for this important initiative. It goes to show how public-private partnerships can address pressing community needs that can not effectively be addressed through government resources alone. With the support of our community, let's hope that in the not-too-distant-future, the new shelter will be operational to offer refuge to these vulnerable families from the brutal New England winter.

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