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Adding a human touch in dealing with homelessness

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Expanding on the idea that a can of tomatoes or a crumpled \$5 bill will cure the city of homelessness during the holiday season, the City of Boston is pushing residents to volunteer to gain a more personal connection with the streets' inhabitants.

Starting next Saturday, City Hall will partner with more than 20 homeless advocacy groups to offer volunteer opportunities from spending time with guests of the Shattuck Shelter in Jamaica Plain to decorating transitional homes for clients of Project Hope.

"This is the first time anything like that has been done," said Cheri Epps, director of Project Stability Opportunity Achievement and Recovery, a Boston Public Health Commission program that provides job training for the homeless.

"The event is just a start in alerting the public to the homelessness crisis in the city. It is a huge problem." According to The Health of Boston 2007 report, 6,413 people were homeless in Boston in 2006 - almost 2,000 more than 10 years earlier -- and 23.7 percent of those were children.

Alicia Ianiere, vice president of development and external affairs for the Pine Street Inn, a homeless shelter, said she hopes the project will attract the volunteers that non-profit organizations like hers depend on.

"This is a terrific event because community involvement starts with a service project," Ianiere said. "You help the organization, but it is an enlightening experience for volunteers, too."

"Homelessness is not an intractable problem," said St. Francis manager of volunteer and pastoral services Lynn Campbell, who said volunteers for her shelter will assemble basic kits with underwear, razors and deodorant for new residents. "It can be solved one person at a time, with the help of committed volunteers."

State Commission to End Homelessness spokesman Philip Hailer said the program brings Boston one step closer to a permanent solution to homelessness.

"We are in the final stages of a comprehensive action plan that will tackle every aspect of homelessness," Hailer said. "Providing permanent housing is one of the solutions."

Elizabeth Zarella, director of development and external affairs for Project Hope, one of Boston's largest homeless advocacy groups, said family homelessness, one the biggest problems facing social reformers, is often a social symptom of poverty that more volunteers can help solve.

"It may only bring in people for a day or two," Zarella said. "But these volunteers will think about the homeless for the rest of the year."

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