

Emanuel to ‘recalibrate’ plans to eradicate homelessness

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Mayor Rahm Emanuel on Friday disclosed plans to “recalibrate” former Mayor Richard M. Daley’s 10-year plan to end homelessness by creating jobs and permanent housing, improving 311 service and reducing “youth homelessness” that impacts 16,000 Chicago Public School students.

The mayor’s 2012 budget already includes a seven percent boost in city funding for homeless services—to \$8.56 million--and a new 20-bed shelter for 18-to-24-year-olds, Chicago’s second “youth shelter.”

But that’s nowhere near enough to accommodate a 98 percent increase since 2003 in the number of CPS students either “doubled-up” with other families or living on the streets, said Ed Shurna, executive director of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless.

“There’s a connection between school performance and homelessness. If homeless kids could be placed in stable living situations, you’ll have better performance in school,” Shurna said.

He added, “We’re encouraged and hopeful that there’s gonna be a greater emphasis on providing housing to end homelessness. We have a moment here where something new might happen with a new mayor. But it’s still a daunting task.”

John Pfeiffer, first-deputy commissioner of the city’s Department and Family and Support Services, said Chicago has more than doubled the supply of permanent supportive housing—to more than 7,000 units--since 2003.

“The majority of people who move into that model are staying there and thriving. But we know we’re not adequately serving homeless youth. We know we need to do more,” he said.

On the eve of his 2003 re-election, Daley established an ambitious goal of ending homelessness in Chicago by 2012. He embraced a plan to make it happen that called for shifting the focus away from shelters and toward permanent housing with a bottomless network of social services.

“You have to do more than just manage homelessness. Our objective should be to prevent homelessness and, ultimately, to end it,” Daley said then.

“Homeless people need a holistic approach: alcohol, drug treatment, job training. It’s not just giving them a bed and saying, ‘Stay here at night. Get out in the morning.’ It isn’t giving someone a bed and a sandwich. You have to rebuild their soul and their mind.”

Part Two of Daley's unfinished plan is expected to be unveiled next spring after a week-long meeting in January that brings together more than a dozen "stakeholders," including homeless advocates, former homeless Chicagoans, service providers and funders.

Pfeiffer said the plan will be based, in part, on a 2.5-year study by researchers at the University of Chicago and Loyola that "tracked the progression of more than 500 people through the system."

It will include "new targets" for development of "affordable housing with services attached" and also address the study's criticisms of the city's 311 non-emergency system, he said.

"We need to give them more tools to help them respond to the needs of a homeless person who might call. We want them to have all the data they need to make good referrals," Pfeiffer said.

Chicago had 6,598 people living on the street or in shelters, according to a January, 2011 count. CPS figures are higher because they include students living "doubled up" with other families.