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Section: Today's Editorials

Area doesn't need more shelters

Homelessness is a problem with many causes. Some people simply fall behind the financial eight-ball. For others, mental illness and substance abuse are contributing factors. And while many people who are technically "homeless" manage to put a roof over their heads, either in a shelter or with family or friends, a certain amount of people find themselves living on the streets.

In North Central Massachusetts those people often gravitate to Fitchburg, drawn to the city by the myriad social service agencies that have offices here, or sometimes, sadly, by illegal drugs that are all too easy to find.

A number of makeshift shelters can be found in wooded areas near downtown -- even under some of the city's bridges.

Pam McDowell says she has been living on the streets for years; these days, her "home" is under a bridge leading to Main Street. "I've been here two years -- winter, spring, fall," she told the Sentinel & Enterprise. "There's too many people here."

"There's camps all over Fitchburg," said Erik Kamppuri, a homeless man who shares McDowell's space under the bridge.

Fitchburg has two shelters -- **Our Father's House** and the Valiton House -- and two transitional housing programs.

In addition, through the Montachusett Interfaith Hospitality Network, area churches offer shelter to individuals and families who otherwise would have nowhere else to go.

But it's not enough. The spots available in shelters don't come close to meeting the demand.

"We've been full right along," said Barbara Garneau, executive director of **Our Father's House**. "The last few years have been very stressful in terms of being full all the time."

Police Chief Edward Cronin believes the region needs another homeless shelter.

But for years now Fitchburg has shouldered more than its share of a problem that involves people from throughout North Central Massachusetts, and Mayor Dan Mylott told the Sentinel & Enterprise that Leominster and Gardner, the other cities in the Montachusett area, need to step up to the plate and see what they can do.

"We are not going to stop homelessness. We are not going to eradicate people living in the woods. It's part of being a city," he said recently in an interview. "We do our share. I'm just fed up with people thinking this has to be the place."

We agree. It's unrealistic and unfair to expect one municipality to deal with societal problems that stretch far beyond the city's borders.

"Every community around has the same problems," said Fitchburg City Councilor at large Ralph R. Romano III. "The difference is Fitchburg provides some of the solutions, so it attracts those people from surrounding communities."

It's hard to imagine Leominster or Gardner city officials will embrace the idea of building a homeless shelter in their communities, and we don't blame them.

Shelters often bring with them crime and drug addiction.

We wouldn't ask either city to locate a homeless shelter in their community.

This entire region has done enough to try to mitigate the homeless problem.

It's time for other organizations -- like churches and social service agencies outside North Central Massachusetts to take up the slack.

At the same time, it's up to the people who found themselves homeless because they're abusing alcohol or drugs to work to get back on their own two feet.

Hard-working residents who pay taxes and follow the rules shouldn't have to offer up their money or city as a location for a homeless shelter for people who are homeless because they spend their days drinking or doing drugs.