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Bill would grant homeless more legal protection

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BOSTON -- An Andover representative last week announced plans to offer homeless individuals more bodily protection by filing legislation to include them under the state's hate crime statute. "This is about protecting those individuals who are most vulnerable," said Rep. Barry Finegold, D-Andover, at a press conference yesterday, citing a statistic from the National Coalition for the Homeless that reports 386 homeless people in the U.S. have been attacked since 1999, resulting in 156 deaths.

"These are our neighbors. These are our families, our veterans, our children," he added.

The existing hate crime statute makes it a crime to assault someone with a motive based on a person's race, religion, sexual orientation or disability.

A person found guilty of such an act can be punished by five years in state prison and a fine as high as \$10,000.

Finegold's bill would add homeless status to the list of motives for assault.

He said an incident last month in Boston where a homeless person was attacked on a North End street inspired him to pursue the legislation.

Finegold hails from Andover, one of the more affluent communities in the state with a low number of homeless, but it neighbors the city of Lawrence -- a portion of which Finegold also represents -- where the problem is much greater.

"It's just one of those issues that move you," said Finegold told a Sentinel reporter before the press conference began.

The bill produced skepticism yesterday from homeless advocates, none of whom had yet heard about the proposal.

"Don't we already have laws that are supposed to be protecting everybody?" asked Barbara Garneau, executive director of **Our Father's House**. "If we could get everybody off the street, that would be the safest thing for people."

Our Father's House took a survey in January that showed 293 people were either on the street or in a shelter in the Fitchburg, Leominster and Gardner areas.

Joe Finn, executive director of the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, said a good portion of the violence that occurs on the streets is not about hate.

"There can also be homeless on homeless (violence), because it's not a very good place to be," he said.

Adding homeless individuals to the hate crime statute could further institutionalize the problem, he said, adding he wants to learn more about Finegold's intent.

"The real crime is the fact there's anybody on the streets at all," he said. "That's where I think the most energy and resources should be directed."