



The Times

Reducing the ranks of the homeless

Advocates urge Mercer County freeholders to support 'trust funds'

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BY ANDREW KITCHENMAN

TRENTON -- Advocates for providing housing for the homeless asked the Mercer County freeholders at their meeting last night to support a new fund to end homelessness.

Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness officials are asking county boards to support state legislation to allow for county-based homeless "trust funds" that would be funded through real-estate taxes or other fees.

Most of the freeholders expressed support for the idea, with at least one saying he would consider devoting county tax dollars to the effort.

Mercer Alliance Executive Director Alison K. Badgett said 76 counties in 10 states have set up similar trust funds, with Washington state funding model projects statewide to reduce homelessness.

Badgett said there are 900 homeless people in Mercer County on any given day, with highs of 2,000. She said counties are finding success in reducing the number of homeless people.

Freeholder Lucy Walter, a teacher in Bucks County, Pa., pointed to examples of students who have lost their books when they become homeless and a student who shares his winter coat with his father.

Freeholder Keith Hamilton encouraged the county government to look at a range of issues connected to homelessness, adding that the county could dedicate a certain amount of tax money over a period of several years to the issue.

"We need to do a little bit more work in understanding the full scope of it," Hamilton said. He added that government could save money by providing better housing if it cuts the expense of busing students, for example.

Freeholder Elizabeth Muoio said the county has a responsibility to take care of the homeless.

"We're only as well off as the neediest of our residents," Muoio said.

The board will consider a resolution asking for a change to state law in April, Freeholder Chairman Pat Colavita said.

The freeholders will hold their fourth meeting to review the county budget tonight, looking at the budgets for the county prosecutor, clerk, sheriff and surrogate.

The board will meet tomorrow night at the Lawrence Senior Center, 30 Darrah Lane East, at 6:30 p.m. It will be the first regular meeting of the freeholder board outside of Trenton since 2004.

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