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Lexington - Every holiday season in my work on behalf of homeless families, I find myself struggling with my inner Grinch.

This is the time of year when it's easiest to remember the homeless. Boxes accepting holiday toys and clothing for homeless children materialize everywhere: in coffee shops, supermarkets, gyms, schools, houses of worship, gas stations, and banks. Everyone is out shopping for holiday gifts anyway, so it's easy to pick up an extra something and drop it off, knowing that a child who might otherwise go without will now get a gift from Santa. It is an undeniably kind thing to do, to show a child he or she has not been forgotten. It is a holiday tradition I would certainly never want to see end.

And yet, in spite of myself, my Grinch grumbles.

That's because I know firsthand that it's harder to fund solutions for homeless families than it is to buy stuff for homeless families. Many organizations across the Commonwealth are using a mix of strategies to end family homelessness. My particular agency operates programs in under-resourced shelters to protect children and mothers from the well-documented deleterious effects of shelter life and to prepare families to be successful in communities going forward. For several years at holiday time, we promoted a program of giving holiday presents for homeless moms. It was wildly successful. Last year, our offices ended up with a room full of gifts, and, like Santa's elves, we went about distributing them to the mothers in the shelters we serve. But we decided to scale that back this year.

Why? Because it was almost too much for the families and too much time and energy for our staff. It's not that we're not grateful that people are supporting families. We are. It's that we became distracted from our primary mission: to provide services and solutions to homeless families.

When my agency got involved with this issue in 2000, family homelessness was considered a crisis that appears minor compared to how things look now. At least 96,000 children are homeless in Massachusetts today. Tonight, over 1,700 families will go to sleep in publicly funded emergency shelters; 1,700 children in those families are under the age of 5. The shelters they live in were designed for emergency, short-term stays. But today, the average stay in many Massachusetts shelters is 16 months. For many families this is almost a year and a half of living in overpopulated human warehouses without privacy, cooking facilities, regular transportation, or childcare; sharing bathrooms with strangers, eating every meal in overcrowded cafeterias, and sleeping in common rooms with other families.

This is a problem because homelessness hurts children. Compared to their peers, homeless children suffer poorer health, greater developmental delays, and frequent emotional and behavioral problems. Their educational achievement is lower even than low income children living in homes. Their mothers are more likely to experience depression and chronic health problems, and to attempt suicide.

And the needs of each family vary widely. A mother with a college education experiencing the setbacks of illness, death, divorce, or job loss can be found in the same shelter as a mother with an 8th grade education and a substance abuse issue and a mother struggling with schizophrenia. Because of the lack of affordable housing and the reliance of the state on a system of under-resourced emergency shelters, everyone is lumped together. The range of services that are needed is very broad.

Homelessness in Massachusetts is an overwhelming problem. The complexity of the issue — and its relative invisibility to those with the means and desire to help — leaves those agencies that are trying to end homelessness and to support those caught in its cycle with the same challenge each year: a groundswell of holiday giving, coupled with a dearth of steady financial assistance throughout the rest of the year for the sorts of services that could truly transform lives.

This needn't be either/or, of course. By all means, donate gifts to families that will appreciate a brighter holiday. The message these gifts send is so important to people who feel forgotten. But please remember that for

thousands of our neighbors homelessness never takes a holiday. My colleagues and I would love to tell our inner Grinches to take a hike!

Jodi Wilinsky Hill is executive director of Parenting Resource Associates, Inc., with offices in Lexington. Their COMPASS for homeless families program works with hundreds of homeless families living in shelters each year. For more information, visit www.parentingresourceassociates.org.

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