



Homing in on the problem

In his crusade to end homelessness, Phil Mangano is pushing a big idea—from an unlikely perch **BY SHAWN ZELLER**

PHIL MANGANO, FORMER manager of hippie musical acts of the 1960s and volunteer at a downtown Boston soup kitchen, would seem one of the least likely Bay Staters to find a home in the administration of President George W. Bush. But that is where he has been toiling for the last four years, gaining converts—and growing recognition—for work that strikes some as an equally unlikely Bush priority: ending chronic homelessness.

Mangano, a longtime advocate for the homeless in Boston, moved to Washington in 2002 to head the Bush administration's Interagency Council on Homelessness, where he has earned accolades from all quarters. Last fall, *Governing*, the national magazine of state and local government, named Mangano one of nine "Public Officials of the Year" (along with Massachusetts House Speaker Sal DiMasi, for his role in last year's landmark health insurance law).

What he's done to earn such kudos is best captured by a story told by Peter Forman, a former Republican state representative and chief of staff to Acting Gov. Jane Swift. Two years ago Forman, who had two weeks earlier accepted, and still had not started, the job of president of the South Shore Chamber of Commerce, bumped into Mangano in Boston's Back Bay. The chance encounter gave Mangano a chance to give Forman a heads-up about a meeting he'd had that morning with Quincy Mayor William Phelan.

"The mayor is going to call you and you are going to become chairman of this committee" to create a plan to end homelessness in the city, Mangano told him, Forman recalls. "I said, 'That's news to me. I haven't even met the mayor yet.'"

"It was typical Phil," says Forman.

Since leaving his post atop the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance to join the Bush

administration, a move that left some of his fellow advocates scratching their heads, Mangano has brought his dream of ending chronic homelessness to the nation's capital, and then back again to the cities. He's convinced the mayors of 282 of them—including 16 in Massachusetts—to do as Phelan and Forman have done: develop a plan to wipe out chronic homelessness within 10 years.

Not only that, but he's started to change the way governments and social service agencies think about the homeless. No longer is homelessness to be thought of as a plague that can be treated but not cured. In Mangano's view, it can, in fact, be ended if government teams with agencies to house and provide support services to the hardcore homeless, those who have been on the streets for years and suffer from debilitating mental illnesses, alcoholism, or drug addiction.

Mangano didn't invent the concept, which is known as "housing first," but he's proven to be its most successful evangelist. Asked his party affiliation, the 58-year-old Bush appointee puts himself in a different category. "I'm an abolitionist," says Mangano, tracing the history of abolitionism, the civil rights movement, and the battle for women's suffrage. In each case, he says, people said it couldn't be done—that slavery was a natural state, that blacks were inferior, that only propertied white males should vote. History has proven them wrong, he says, and the same will prove true of homelessness.

Despite the implicit moralism, Mangano makes what is, in effect, a business case for abolishing homelessness, which is one reason his thinking has had appeal in the Bush White House. Constituting about 10 percent of the 25,000 people who spend at least one night a year in a Massachusetts shelter, the chronically homeless consume half of all resources devoted to the homeless, he says—at

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least \$40,000 per person, and as much as \$150,000 per year. Living almost permanently in what were meant to be temporary shelters, and often finding themselves in emergency rooms or police custody, the hardcore homeless were seen as too uncooperative to place in housing. Not so, says Mangano, who claims that housing and support services for even the toughest veteran of the streets can be had for \$13,000 to \$25,000 per year.

"It makes common sense, and it makes dollars and cents," he says.

Mangano talks the language of government-as-business MBA types, tossing out casual references to the "Killer Bs"—baselines, benchmarks, and budget. Which explains why he insisted to Phelan that, if he wanted to get the homeless off his city's streets, Peter Forman was his man.

"We've evolved from five to 10 years ago on who the stakeholders are," says Mangano. "Then it was a few low-level bureaucrats, the faith communities, and the social service providers. It was well-intentioned and well meaning, but we never got results. They were lacking resources and a strategic business sense. When you convene stakeholders now, you need the chamber of commerce, the hospitals, the providers of substance abuse services, the librarians, law enforcement."

Quincy's mayor, for one, was sold immediately. John Yazwinski, the director of the city's largest shelter, Father Bill's Place, worked with Phelan and Forman to shut down at least 10 shelter beds each year and move an equal number of homeless people into permanent housing. Some short-term shelter beds will always be needed, says Yazwinski, but the closures send an important message about the city's commitment to the permanent housing solution, while also preventing it from becoming a magnet for chronically homeless people from other cities.

Quincy is not the only place in the Bay State to embrace the Mangano model. In October, the South Middlesex Opportunity Council in Framingham closed its Common Ground overflow shelter by moving 30 long-term homeless people into permanent housing. The day the shelter closed "was one of the most satisfying days in the 22 years I've been here," says James Cuddy, the council's executive director.

THROUGH HIS INTERAGENCY Council, Mangano has brought federal agencies together in an effort to coordinate funding streams, and he's pushed the Bush administration for more money. As a result, the 2007 federal budget for homeless services is the first to top \$4 billion. "The president provided the first substantive political will to bring an end to homelessness," declares Mangano.

Some advocates for the homeless are less taken with the president's efforts. Despite their respect for Mangano, they can't stomach giving credit to an administration they

see as doing little to provide affordable housing to low-income families. The vast majority of people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless don't suffer from debilitating addiction or disease, they point out, and the government should be looking out for them as well.

"We strongly believe in what the Housing First model does," says Robyn Frost, executive director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. "But what concerns us is there isn't nearly as much discussion of people who are tenuously housed." By Frost's estimate, Massachusetts has 550,000 low-income households who could find themselves without a place to sleep if something went awry.

And Mangano's gospel hasn't caught on everywhere in the Bay State. Boston, with some 6,300 homeless people, has agreed to devise a 10-year plan, but has not yet done so. (Officials did not respond to requests for comment, but in December the city announced a "homeless protection program" that includes permanent housing for 30 homeless elders and a 10-bed reentry unit for homeless men released from prison.) "Boston historically has done a great job," says Mangano, "[but] other cities have caught up to it and are now moving past."

That's disappointing for Mangano, a Belmont native who spent much of his life in the city, though not all of it advocating for the homeless. He started out on a career in the music business, promoting concerts in Massachusetts. Later, he moved to Los Angeles and managed performers like Richie Furay of Buffalo Springfield and Noel Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul, and Mary.

Mangano says Franco Zeffirelli's *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, on the life of St. Francis of Assisi, inspired him to return to Boston and dedicate his life to serving the poor. Though he thought about becoming a priest, he decided instead to volunteer at St. Anthony Shrine's breadline downtown. In 1992, after running two homeless programs in Cambridge, he became founding executive director of the housing and shelter alliance, a statewide advocacy group.

It's there that he first promoted the Housing First concept, and honed his skills as a lobbyist, working the halls of the State House during the Weld and Cellucci administrations. His transformation from bleeding heart to business-minded advocate, he says, came in jousting with Weld aide Charlie Baker, who served as secretary of human services and later administration and finance.

"When we first met with Charlie, we thought anecdotes might work one more time," says Mangano. But Baker told him, "That era is over, and you'd better know what the numbers are and outcomes will be if any resources are going to be invested," Mangano recalls.

Since then, Mangano has taken a more hard-headed approach to advocacy. "We all feel we are doing a good job," he says. "And we are doing good. But what we're trying to do is go to great." **CW**



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