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HOMELESS

Stadium plan no slam dunk

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A legislative proposal to curb homelessness in Florida by requiring taxpayer-funded stadiums to double as shelters on off-nights may end up doing more harm than good for individuals and families without a permanent place to call home.

South Florida has been among the areas hardest hit



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by the national real estate crisis. Property values have fallen off dramatically, unemployment rates continue to outpace the national average, and a study by the Center for Housing Policy found that 42 percent of South Floridians spend more than half their total income on housing, compared to only 23 percent nationally.

Our shelters are at 100 percent capacity and affordable housing construction over the past year has not kept pace with demand, despite more than \$2 billion in federal stimulus funding being put to work statewide to develop residences for families in need. This is forcing some municipalities to take

extreme measures.

The city of Miami has resorted to underwriting the cost of housing dozens of families in motel rooms.

While opening unused, publicly-funded stadiums — American Airlines Arena and the new Miami Marlins Ballpark, for example — to the homeless population will put a bandage on the problem, it will do nothing to address a deepening shortage of affordable, permanent housing throughout our state.

Rather than expending valuable resources on the stadium-to-shelter plan, lawmakers should invest in creating new sources of funding for affordable housing projects and support programs that aim to transition homeless residents into the workforce.

Likewise, any stadium plan introduced should be linked to a community group that can provide supportive services and help residents develop a roadmap for self-sufficiency.

If the stadiums (or their tenants) resist the idea of moonlighting as shelters, then the state should offer them an opportunity to contribute to a fund that supports these proactive initiatives.

The concept of utilizing

public buildings as housing is a good one and these facilities could play an important role in the management and protection of our homeless population. But numerous studies prove that shelters are not long-term fixes and provide little support for residents seeking a permanent place to live.

Legislators in Tallahassee must proceed with caution. Authorizing stadium usage as shelters on a temporary, last-resort basis is worthy of consideration, but the state

should simultaneously commit resources to reducing homelessness over the long-term through permanent housing solutions that present real opportunities to help affected individuals and families get back on their feet.

Stephanie Berman is president of Carrfour Supportive Housing, a nonprofit developer and operator of affordable housing communities in South Florida.

