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State's Shelters Split over Data Collection

By Brent Curtis, Rutland Herald

To some, a new state-run database that tracks homeless activity in Vermont is the perfect means for viewing the extent of the homeless plight and the right tool to plan for future needs more efficiently.

But to others, the new Homeless Management Information System operated by the state Agency of Human Services is an intrusion of "Big Brother" into the lives of people who often have nothing left to lose but their privacy.

Implemented by the state to meet federal requirements for collecting aggregate numerical data on homeless activity, use of the database has become a controversial topic due to a state request that shelters include personal input on the people they serve.

A sample entry form on the HMIS log-on page includes fill-in-the-blanks for Social Security numbers, ethnicity, veteran status and disabling conditions.

State officials said personal information is only added to the database with the consent of individuals. However, if none of the residents at a shelter voluntarily participate, state officials have said federal funding in the form of Housing and Urban Development emergency shelter grants could be jeopardized.

Still, homeless residents and staff at the Open Door Mission in Rutland have refused to put personal information into the database and directors at two other shelters – including the largest one in the state – said they have serious reservations about the new information system as well.

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