

Assembly passes homelessness bills but Dems say larger investments needed

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The state Assembly today passed four GOP bills aimed at helping address homelessness, with two passing unanimously and several Dems opposing the other two.

Dems said the package isn't enough to solve the issue, while also saying past GOP policies such as changes in landlord-tenant laws have only exacerbated it.

"I don't like legislation that is feel-good, that has no teeth and will have no results," said Rep. Gary Hebl, D-Sun Prairie.

Assembly Majority Leader Jim Steineke, R-Kaukauna, acknowledged "there is more to do" but said the state needs to make sure it's spending money effectively. He's the co-author of one of the bills, AB 234, which would create an interagency council to find ways for state agencies to collaborate on the issue.

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He said the package is "only the first step" in what will be a years-long effort.

"Our side of the aisle wants to be able to prove results before we're throwing dollars at programs," he said.

Sen. Alberta Darling, R-River Hills, is the co-author of all four bills.

AB 234 passed unanimously, as did AB 235, aimed at freeing up state resources that are underutilized and putting them in areas with greatest need. Rep. Pat Snyder, R-Schofield, is the co-author of the bill.

Some Dems voted for AB 236, which would call for a pilot program prioritizing chronically homeless individuals on a waiting list to get federally-funded housing vouchers. The bill, co-authored by Rep. Treig Pronschinske, R-Mondovi, passed 73-25.

Dems unsuccessfully sought an amendment adding more funding to the program, expanding the number of vouchers available to help others on the waitlist.

“We are simply rearranging the deck chairs if we follow the Republicans’ lead here and change who has priority for vouchers,” said Rep. Lisa Subeck, D-Madison.

The fourth bill, AB 237, is aimed at creating grants for local governments to set up programs connecting homeless people with jobs and workforce training. The bill’s supporters have pointed to a similar program in Albuquerque, New Mexico, that pays people who help the city for the day.

The bill passed 88-10.

Rep. Daniel Riemer, D-Milwaukee, likened the bill’s approach to President Roosevelt’s New Deal, connecting people with jobs and understanding that it’s “about much more than a paycheck.”

But Subeck said Albuquerque’s program resembles a day labor program and is merely aimed at getting panhandlers off the street for the day, adding she doesn’t see “where this connects people to permanent employment or even gives them much hope of it.”

“This is a way to get cheap labor for something like cleaning up our parks and pat ourselves on the back because we did something good on the process,” she said.

But co-author Rep. Jessie Rodriguez, R-Oak Creek, said the Albuquerque program has been a success, though the local governments that get the grant money will have the flexibility to “come up with a model that works for us here.”

“We have a chance to help people throughout each area of the state who want to work, who want to contribute to their communities and have a place to call home,” she said.