Year since Long Island’s close finds safeguards still lacking

By David Abel
Globe Staff

A year after city officials abruptly closed Long Island, evacuating hundreds of homeless residents and recovering addicts because the rickety bridge to the island was no longer safe, gaping holes remain in the city’s social safety net.

More than 100 recovery and detox beds, much in demand, have yet to be replaced. Many former residents, such as Jacqueline Carrasquillo, have bounced between programs and still struggle with the emotional repercussions of the island’s unexpected closure.

“A lot of people felt so uprooted that they gave up hope,” said Carrasquillo, 27, a recovering heroin addict who said the rushed exodus on Oct. 8, 2014, nearly pushed her back onto the street.

Some shelter residents did return to the streets within days of the closing, again in the thrall of their addictions. Others tried, but eventually failed, to stay in addiction recovery programs.

In all, more than 700 men and women who lived on the island were scattered around the city. Many of them spent nine months sleeping on aluminum-framed...
Holes in safety net persist a year later

Jacqueline Carrasquillo is doing well at her group home in Dorchester but keeps relies of her Long Island program.

"These are crucial services that are now gone."

Bay Cove has struggled to find a home for Andrew House. The costs in Boston are too steep, and few neighbors want to live beside a detox center, which became clear last year when residents protested a plan to move the program to the old Radius Hospital in Roxbury.

"They're now looking at potential properties outside the city. "It's really disappointing," Laprade said. "We have left no stone unturned to replace the space."

Mayor Martin J. Walsh acknowledged the toll from the closure of Long Island.

"The fact that we haven't relocated all the programs from Long Island certainly doesn't make me happy," he said in a telephone interview. "I know there are people struggling. We have to do a better job."

Over the past year, the city has spent about $17 million to tear down Long Island Bridge, but Walsh said he hasn't had any conversations with other officials about whether to rebuild it.

As for the future of Long Island, a valuable, 225-acre stretch of vacant buildings and fallow farmland in the middle of Boston Harbor, Walsh said: "I haven't really thought about it. Dollars are scarce."

The city has addressed many of the needs of the homeless, spending $10 million to build a shelter in the Newmarket area of Boston, where nearly 400 men now live. It has also spent more than $1.5 million to renovate the Woods Mullen Shelter for 200 women and to replace 75 addiction recovery and prisoner reentry beds in Mattapan.

The overall loss of services on Long Island has come as the state's opiate crisis has worsened. At least 1,256 state residents died last year after overdosing on opioids - a sharp jump from each of the previous two years, according to the state Department of Public Health. Many of those people were homeless.

'It's really disappointing. We have left no stone unturned to replace the space.'

JAMES LAPRADE
On Bay Cove’s struggles since its Long Island detox center closed

Program. "Treatment beds are what's critically needed now."

Despite the city's spending, advocates for the homeless say more is needed and have sought help from the state to add more beds.

"Delaying the delivery of services further victimizes not only those who require them but also the public health," the Boston Homeless Solidarity Committee wrote in a recent appeal to Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders. "Plans alone are no longer sufficient. Specific, prompt action must be taken."

State officials have offered to meet with the committee, but they have not come up with a plan for more beds, committee officials said.

Last week, City Council members released a report that acknowledged the "extreme distress" the island's closure caused for its residents.

"I certainly believe more needs to be done," said Councilor Charles Yancey, who has held hearings on the island's closure.

More than most, Jacqueline Carrasquillo understands the needs.

She still vividly recalls the fear she felt when police burst into Joelyn's Family Home and ordered her and dozens of other women just finishing dinner to leave their refuge — immediately. She and others worried there had been a terrorist attack and didn't have time to pack underwear, medicine, or family photos.

After leaving Long Island, Carrasquillo went through several programs and now lives in a group home in Dorchester, where signs exhorted her to "keep calm and carry on" and "treat yourself like the queen you are."

Carrasquillo said she has been sober for 15 months and now has a job as a waitress.

"I believe I am a miracle to have survived this," she said.

David Abel can be reached at dabel@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter @davabel.