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Editor's Note

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In the domain of public policy, there often appears to be an inverse relationship between our ability to identify and define, sometimes with great specificity, the scale and dimensions of the problems we face and our capacity to address them. One reason for this state of affairs is that our major public policy dilemmas are interconnected — attention to one would require attention to many — and without the threat of catastrophic crisis, no action or piecemeal action is invariably preferred to comprehensive action.

But there is at least one other important factor at work: the question of who are the agents, public or private, responsible for developing and implementing the remedy. Indeed, for every public issue there is a second set of interconnections — a network of interconnected public responsibilities, a subtext of shared responsibilities that we are slow to recognize and slower still to act on. The executive branch passes the buck to Congress; both, too often, abrogate their responsibilities to the courts; the federal government points the finger at state government, and state government, itself no slouch when it comes to the fine art of buck passing, unloads on the cities and towns. Nor does it stop there. Public responsibilities are not synonymous with the public sector. Public-private partnerships, community organizations, philanthropic foundations, volunteerism — all at one time or another are the responsible agents of policy development and implementation. But they too are prone to view their responsibilities in the narrow context of their own missions. Thus, in both the public and the private sector, roles are ill defined and ill suited to the tasks at hand, and the structure of the interconnections are confused, leaving many public policy problems in a vacuum — the child of many in matters of identification and definition, an orphan to all in developing and implementing a remedy.

Addressing public policy issues in the context of the agents responsible for developing and implementing remedies for specific problems is an underlying theme in the issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* and is especially germane to two articles.

Rebecca Stevens and Joseph Doolin address two aspects of the same issue — the availability of affordable housing — from two very different perspectives. New England's affordable housing shortages, Stevens argues, threaten the ability of the region to sustain economic growth. In every state in New England, housing prices have risen sharply, outpacing increases in wages. As a result employers across New England are facing difficulties in finding employees of all types, and labor shortages are pushing wages up and

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undermining the region's competitive advantages. Although the housing crisis is especially acute in the New England states, the crisis is national. Between 1981 and 1989 the country experienced a 75 percent cutback in federal housing assistance — from $30.2 billion to $7.5 billion. In the 1970s, the federal government helped to build more than 200,000 subsidized new units a year. In contrast, in 1988, Congress authorized less than 15,000 new units. For the first time since World War II, America has experienced a decline in the number of people who own their own homes.

Despite the fact that the New England states and their cities have developed a number of strategies to ease shortages of affordable housing, Stevens shows that they are simply not up to the task of remedying the problem. "Urgent affordable housing needs will remain unmet," she concludes, "unless the federal government gets back into the housing business." In short, New England's economic future is directly related to the federal government's willingness to assume some responsibility for affordable housing and to adapt itself to the imperatives of shared responsibilities.

Doolin's article articulates responsibilities of a different order. Doolin examines the lives of a number of Boston's homeless elders. He draws on their life histories, providing us with insights into their coping strategies, allowing us to get a glimpse of the world of street persons, showing us how they got there, what their lives are like, and how they integrate their past into the values and milieu of their current homeless situation. For most, homelessness is just one more manifestation of their lifelong poverty. "Most homeless elders," he observes, "have had long work histories, largely in peripheral, unskilled employment areas, itinerant work, food service, resort, factory and construction work." A clear majority of homeless elders are troubled by an alcoholic present or past. Nevertheless, Doolin writes, "One of the notable characteristics of older homeless people is their ordinariness. . . . They are people who have worked, raised families, owned property, paid taxes, voted, and defended their country in military service. Those looking for exotic subcultures must look elsewhere."

Considering the broader picture of homelessness, Doolin draws our attention to the national preference for a shelter policy rather than a homeless policy — in short, for policies that limit our definition of the scale of our public responsibilities. "In addition to being significantly less expensive than the alternative of investing in affordable housing," he writes, "the shelter policy allows us to lull ourselves into the belief that homelessness is a temporary emergency situation, thereby ignoring the root causes — chronic poverty, the weakness of our economic system, and the disintegration of the American family."

Daryl Hellman, Andrew Sum, and Joseph Warren's article is an excellent case study in how the concept of shared responsibility should work in practice. It analyzes the probable impact of development in Parcel 18, the anchor parcel in Boston's Southwest Corridor economic development project. Within a few years, up to a million square feet of office and retail space and other complementary land uses will be developed, and several thousand permanent jobs are expected to be generated. Parcel 18 is located in Roxbury; poverty is far more pervasive, annual income earnings are substantially lower, and unemployment rates are sharply higher than for the city of Boston as a whole. The authors' review of the demographic and socioeconomic background of Parcel 18 residents indicates, however, that the neighborhood is unlikely to benefit fully from economic development in the absence of coordinated public-private actions to boost the educational competencies and job preparedness of the many unemployed, underdeveloped, and disadvantaged residents. Specific programs to match Parcel 18 residents to new job opportunities will be critical to the success of development efforts; such programs must emanate

from within the community itself under the direction of the Parcel 18+ Task Force, the locus of the many community organizations responsible for bringing change to the Southwest Corridor.

Fredric Waldstein examines the public sector agencies that are responsible for monitoring cost containment of Medicaid in Massachusetts. He argues that because of the unwillingness of elected officials to face head-on the troublesome issues surrounding Medicaid and its growth, the state government agencies responsible for cost containment — the Massachusetts Department of Public Welfare and the Massachusetts Medicaid Fraud Control Unit — have been left to define the scope of the problem, design remedial measures to address it, and evaluate their relative success. This process, he finds, is unsatisfactory on several counts that are not necessarily the fault of the state agencies. He argues for a national cost containment policy fashioned by elected officials that allows a comparative framework for evaluation across states.

Shaun O'Connell brings his usual insights to his book review essay. "Our novelists," he concludes, "have served us better than our politicians in classifying our condition" — an accomplishment that is somewhat less grand than it seems when we remember that the recent competition came from George Bush's "Read my lips" and "A thousand points of light" and Michael Dukakis's "Good jobs at good wages" and "I'm on your side."

In "Home to New England," Alfred Alcorn adds a very personal dimension to our ongoing search for the characteristics that define the New England ethic. Visiting his father-in-law's home, built in Chelmsford in 1690, became an experience "a little like touching history itself, the vernacular history of a simple, hardworking and yet cannily sophisticated people." ❧