

House speaker scuttles Baker plan on homelessness



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House Speaker Robert DeLeo

By Joshua Miller | GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 25, 2015

House Speaker Robert A. DeLeo has essentially scuttled Governor Charlie Baker's plan to narrow eligibility for homeless families seeking state-funded emergency housing.

DeLeo said in an interview Friday he had spoken with the chairman of the House budget committee, and they both agreed that “narrowing the eligibility requirements was not a good thing” and “would not be in the best interest of the homeless.” He said the provision will not be part of a key bill poised for a vote next week.

The chairwoman of the Senate budget committee had earlier expressed reluctance to back Baker’s plan, so DeLeo’s declaration effectively ends the Baker effort — at least for now.

Advocates for homeless families, who had sharply criticized the Baker proposal, immediately celebrated the news.

“We’re really grateful that the Legislature has examined this issue and realized that restricting access to shelter for the most vulnerable families isn’t a way to end homelessness,” said Kelly Turley, director of legislative advocacy at the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless.

Baker homeless plan draws worry, praise

The administration says its proposal is part of an effort to find long-term housing for struggling families.

Massachusetts is the country’s only right-to-shelter state. When eligible families — those whose incomes are close to or below the federal poverty level — can show they are homeless because of no-fault eviction, domestic violence, natural disaster, or health and safety risks, the state is mandated to provide shelter.

After the state's 3,500 shelter beds are full, Massachusetts puts homeless families — pregnant women, or parents with children under age 21 — in hotels and motels at an average cost of \$106 per night.

Hotels and motels are generally a bad place for families to live for an extended period, frequently separating them the support of relatives and friends, familiar schools, and easy access to public transportation, advocates, experts and the Baker administration agree. And Baker has pledged to reduce the number of families in hotels and motels to zero before the end of his first term.

Baker's proposal, which was paired with \$5 million for homelessness-prevention efforts to get families on solid footing, would suspend the criteria used to approve roughly 40 percent of families who received emergency housing in the first half of this year. Those in irregular overnight sleeping situations, repeatedly moving from place to place in a short period of time, and those living in units considered "unfit for human habitation" would no longer be eligible.

Baker administration officials have framed the effort as part of a expansive push to find long-term housing for struggling families, with a goal of providing resources to get them on their feet before ever being put into a shelter or motel. And they have emphasized that, even with their proposed law change, those who are truly in need wouldn't be turned away.

The Baker administration remains committed to serving all homeless families, said spokesman Billy Pitman, by "ending the use of costly motels which aren't the best solution for those in need, instead meeting families at the front door to divert them to more permanent services provided by local providers, and working with the Legislature for additional solutions to best serve this vulnerable population."

The eligibility-narrowing proposal was in a broader bill filed by Baker this summer meant to close out the books on the fiscal year that ended in June. DeLeo said he expects a House vote on a version of the bill next week. The bill's new language was not available Friday afternoon, but DeLeo made clear that the eligibility-narrowing provision would not be in it.

Libby Hayes, executive director of Homes for Families, a nonprofit group working to end homelessness in Massachusetts, lauded DeLeo and the Legislature as a whole.

Hayes said DeLeo visited a family shelter in East Boston on Thursday and listened to a homeless mother speaking about her experience becoming homeless and her life goals.

The woman, Hayes said, would not have been eligible for state-funded shelter under Baker's proposed change.

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