



Mass. Senate unveils \$39.5b budget

By [Joshua Miller](#) | GLOBE STAFF MAY 17, 2016

Senate leaders unveiled a \$39.5 billion budget proposal Tuesday that would effectively expand eligibility for state-funded emergency housing for homeless families, boost spending on the University of Massachusetts, and make the state's child advocate more independent.

The proposal from the Senate Committee on Ways and Means, would mark a 2.6 percent increase in overall spending and, despite modest changes in several areas, would stay within the broad parameters of the spending plans of the House and Governor Charlie Baker.

Like those earlier proposals, the Senate plan wouldn't raise taxes; much of the spending would be devoted to MassHealth, the state's healthcare program for the poor and disabled; and it would put significant new money toward programs to fight the scourge of substance abuse in the state.

"The budget you have before you is a fiscally responsible budget," said Karen E. Spilka, chairwoman of the Senate Committee on Ways and Means and an Ashland Democrat.

One notable policy change Senate leaders put forward has to do with homelessness.

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 domestic violence, natural disaster, no-fault eviction, or severe health and safety risks, the state is mandated to provide housing. That often takes the form of a room in a shelter, motel, or hotel.

But sometimes families who would otherwise be eligible under the health and safety risk provision and have nowhere else to go that night, are turned away by the state. That's because the family hasn't actually slept somewhere unfit for human habitation, such as the backseat of a car or a park bench. Once an eligible family sleeps in such a place for a night, they are placed in a shelter or motel.

Senate leaders inserted a new provision in their budget that says shelter should be provided to a family that has no other feasible alternative housing and — but for not having spent one night in a place like a car, park, emergency room, or abandoned building— would be eligible.

“We shouldn't be telling people to be sleeping on the street one night with their kids to get access to shelter,” Spilka told reporters. Her aides said the effort is meant to clarify the Legislature's intent for how the governor should administer the program.

It remains unclear whether the change will end up in law, and Baker may balk at expanding what is already a more generous shelter program than those of other states.

But homeless advocates lauded the proposal.

“This language is really critical because, from July of last year through April, 535 families stayed in places not meant for human habitation before they were deemed eligible for shelter by the state,” said Kelly Turley, director of legislative advocacy at the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless.

If the language is included in the final budget, she said, it “would prevent families from having to stay in such unsafe conditions and expose their children to undue additional trauma.”

In another policy change, Senate leaders would make the Office of the Child Advocate, charged with investigating Massachusetts’ troubled Department of Children and Families, more independent.

Under current law, the governor appoints the advocate. The Senate proposes making the position a five-year appointment by a vote of the attorney general, the state auditor, and the governor.

The current head of the office, Maria Z. Mossaides, has said such changes would mean the agency can truly operate without fear of reprisal, since the governor also oversees DCF.

The Senate budget would boost spending on the University of Massachusetts by about 1.5 percent, a bit more than the House and governor’s 1 percent hike, but still less than the more generous increases of recent years.

As with the Baker and House plans, the Senate budget proposal would rely on just over \$250 million in one-time money — cash that can’t be easily replicated from year to year. That includes \$150 million diverted from the state’s emergency rainy day fund, a move that troubles watchdogs who believe Massachusetts’ savings account should be better stocked.

Lawmakers have limited discretion over to how spend taxpayer dollars. Ballooning health care costs for the poor and disabled continue to make up about 40 percent of the budget. Pensions and debt service payments eat up sizable chunks.

Still, the bottom line of the Senate budget is poised to increase as individual legislators add amendments with new spending on favored items. Once the Senate passes the bill, it will go to a closed-door House-Senate committee that will hash out a final proposal. That will be sent to the governor for his expected signature and line-item vetoes.

The new fiscal year begins on July 1.

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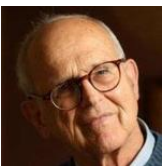
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Number of homeless families in state-funded motels drops

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