

Costs at heart of emergency shelter eligibility debate



JOHN BLANDING/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

Homeless people waited to be admitted to the Boston Night Center last January.

By [Joshua Miller](#) | GLOBE STAFF JUNE 19, 2016

Advocates call it one of the state's cruelest requirements. Before some poor homeless families can qualify for taxpayer-funded shelter and motel rooms, they must spend a night in a place "unfit for human habitation" — such as an emergency room, park bench, or campground — to be legally homeless in the eyes of the state.

To change that, the state Senate quietly passed a measure last month dropping the mandate. Supporters say the move would cost the state little in added caseload

from having to endure a night of hardship to satisfy a bureaucratic checklist.

But officials in the administration of Governor Charlie Baker say the change would cost the state an added \$41 million annually and mean hundreds more families per month would enter the system, already seen as the nation's most generous.

The emotional debate over whether to expand eligibility is playing out behind closed doors at the State House. Negotiators for the Senate, which backs the change, and the House, which doesn't, are tangling over the final wording of Massachusetts' \$39.5 billion spending plan.

In a twist, not all advocates for the homeless support dropping the controversial hardship requirement. Some say the adjustment would needlessly expand Massachusetts' emergency shelter program, leading to more and more families being placed in last-resort hotels and motels at taxpayer expense.

"This change may be well intentioned, but what we've learned, of course, is that good intentions often lead to unintended consequences for the people to whom we are extending our largesse," said Philip Mangano, a longtime advocate for the homeless who worked for the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. "So, some tell us, let's put moms and kids in motels for just a day or two. But the reality is they're there for months and months, isolating them from social capital including faith communities, their families, and often their support systems."

Mangano continued: "In our rush to be do-gooders, we do long-term bad for these moms and children."

But at its core, this is a debate more about money than morals.

The average state cost to put a family in emergency shelter is \$117 per night. And proponents say expanding eligibility would, at most, mean a few hundred more families spend a single additional night or weekend on the taxpayers' dime, for a

Comments
But, according to the Baker administration estimate, the policy proposal would mean 200 additional families would enter emergency housing per month that otherwise would not have been eligible for a state-funded room, costing taxpayers an additional \$41 million annually. Administration officials said the estimate is based on their expectation of increased demand, but didn't provide details.

Which of the vastly different projections is closer to reality is hard to know, experts say, because it depends on how many families seek the state's help.

The House's coolness to the proposal — as well as the Baker administration's — comes as lawmakers are grappling with a budget deficit projected to be significant.

In the fiscal year that ends on June 30, the state is projected to spend almost \$200 million on housing for homeless families, and tens of millions of dollars more on a program that provides up to \$8,000 to help pay for rent, utilities, and other expenses so families can stay in their homes, or defray the costs of staying with a friend or relative.



With the state facing what could be a \$750 million shortfall in the new fiscal year, expanding the emergency housing program could be a big reach.

Kelly Turley of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless said the change would have a profound impact on hundreds of families.

From last July through April, she said citing state data, more than 500 families stayed in a place unfit for human habitation for at least one night before entering taxpayer-funded shelter.

“This change would benefit children and families who are already experiencing homelessness — often seeking help when they can no longer double up with another family in untenable situations. They’re just not homeless enough by the administration’s standards to get help,” Turley said.

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 health and safety risks, the state is mandated to provide housing. That can take the form of a room in a shelter or, if there aren’t any left, a hotel or motel.

On Friday night, there were 485 families in taxpayer-funded hotels and motels, and 3,326 in taxpayer-funded shelters.

Baker, who took office in January 2015, has pledged to end the practice of sending families to hotels and motels by the end of his first term. And the number of families in such accommodations has dropped significantly since then, from 1,500 to less than 500.

Advocates, lawmakers, and the governor broadly agree that hotels and motels are often a terribly inadequate option for housing families. That type of lodging frequently separates families from the social support of relatives and friends,

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So some advocates are of two minds about further expanding eligibility, which would almost certainly lead to the number of mothers, fathers, and kids in motels rising, without solving the underlying problem of too few affordable apartments for people who are just barely scraping by financially.

“Expanding eligibility doesn’t solve the larger crisis,” said Libby Hayes, executive director of Homes for Families, a nonprofit.

“The last thing that we want is for motel numbers to go up,” she said, “but we don’t want families to be sleeping in ERs or on the street either.”

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HardRains 06/19/16 09:10 PM

Bigger government and higher taxes will solve this problem. Always does.



unblogger 06/20/16 07:20 AM

It's a start.



Antietem 06/19/16 09:28 PM

The state should not be encouraging parents to take kids to a homeless shelter for

Comments



user_4427381 06/20/16 06:47 AM

The hospital, organization providing shelter or the police write a letter stating that the family is staying in a place unfit for human habitation.



daisy1 06/20/16 08:27 AM

or in a car or at a campground. There must be some criteria that realistically factors into eligibility. I like that they are filtering the needy out of hotels/motels. That was a bad idea that never worked well, but perhaps Hotels/motels can be considered an alternative for sheltering.



torioski 06/19/16 09:33 PM

How about having non profit institutions like colleges, hospitals and churches pay property taxes and then having that money go for providing housing and shelter for people. Places like Harvard, the Catholic Church and Partners Health Care are non-profit by structure only...they have plenty of resources and could be paying their fair share.



olderlady 06/20/16 07:38 AM

Most downtown churches, besides keeping up historical buildings that draw tourists to the city and are often used by the broader nonprofit community, do plenty for all kinds of people. Lucky you if you've never been down and out enough to learn first-hand what they do. Otherwise you'd you'd be grateful for it.



RoslindaleMom 06/19/16 09:42 PM

Has Mangano ever spent a night in his car with his kids? He worked for Obama for 100 days ... Just until the administration got around to getting rid of him. Let's be real about this guys agenda -- it's W's.



jshore 06/20/16 09:05 AM

Mangano said. "isolating them from social capital including faith communities, their families, and often their support systems."

Exactly RoslindaleMom! It's as if Mangano wants to punish and teach the homeless a lesson! If these homeless families had alternative "support systems" they would have already used them. As a Boston Teacher, I see the long-term trauma homelessness causes to children. We can do better in Massachusetts!



PL 06/20/16 12:14 AM

Good for the Senate, one night in a lousy hotel still beats sleeping on the street. Baker's "do more with less" is not based on reality.



salemreader 06/20/16 07:41 AM

Neither is the governor.



DaleOrlando 06/20/16 07:53 AM

For the same \$41 million, we could be doing this:

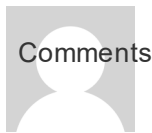
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcoHaWUHCO8>

and we could be doing this:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_6BWKgbrHw

But let's not rush into putting people on a path to independence.

I like the idea of financing it through a mandatory fund from the "tax exempt non-profits" . They should be sponsoring Community First tiny homes anyway based upon their missions and the savings to the taxpayers-between Emergency Rooms and jails, the chronic homeless, including families that are intermittently homeless, need better solutions than what we offer now.



Comments



michaelanncb 06/20/16 08:02 AM

Being a "right to shelter" state does not mean that every homeless family is sheltered-- more than 50% are turned away because they don't fit into existing categories. Non-eligible families include those who have low incomes-- often working families-- who gradually fall behind on their rent and are evicted. In order for an evicted family to be eligible, it has to be "for no fault of their own" and being poor doesn't count. Yet these families are no less homeless.

Sending homeless families to the emergency room for a night risks the intervention of the Dept. of Families and Children. And Emergency room personnel are often unwilling to provide a family with needed documentation.

The root of homelessness is lack of affordable housing and well-paying jobs. Massachusetts is 6th of 50 states in income inequality; Boston has the third most costly rental market in the country. We won't solve homelessness until we solve the housing crisis.

In the meantime, we've simply got to shelter these families. From a fiscal point of view, the hidden costs of homelessness to the commonwealth exceed the cost of sheltering-- physical and mental health issues, DCF involvement, and kids who lose out on education, to name a few. From a human point of view, is there really any question about what we should do?



hmmm100 06/20/16 08:20 AM

Spending the night at an ER is no way cheaper than 1 night at a motel



kilted FF 06/20/16 08:24 AM

baker is showing that he's a real 'compassionate conservative', he sees there is a problem, feels bad about it (compassion) won't spend a dime to help (conservative)



Chaya37 06/20/16 08:31 AM
Comments

Right to shelter should be done on a federal level. We might just be picking up the slack from our deadbeat neighboring states.



jazzmetoo 06/20/16 08:55 AM

So what to do?

For sure we need to build more affordable housing.

For sure the folks that work need to make a living wage.

For sure we'll have to tax in order to spend.



KatherineBennett 06/20/16 09:09 AM

When important programs like Homestart have their funding denied, the reality is that there is more need for emergency shelter almost immediately. I'm the first to agree that emergency shelter options are toxic for children and must be used as a last resort, but as realistic paths for lower income families to achieve/hold onto permanent housing disappear, more families fall into a cycle of homelessness. This is the unintended consequence of the sort of "fiscal responsibility" that leads to greater costs down the line. Why? Cutting resources for this vulnerable population causes family units to deteriorate further, learning/behavior problems in children are exacerbated, and stable employment is nearly impossible without permanent housing. Emergency housing is not the final answer, but is a necessary harm reduction reality that needs to be properly funded to avoid calamity that costs the taxpayers far more than whatever funds are saved in the short term.

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