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Sarah Ferris
Spare Change News

The Massachusetts Legislature set aside more than \$80 million for permanent housing assistance in next year's budget — while slashing budgets for emergency assistance — as the state rolls forward with an overhaul of its costliest housing programs.

The state Legislature approved the massive expansion of Governor Deval Patrick's flagship HomeBASE program, imposing additional limits on how the money can be spent for the overwhelmingly popular — and costly — housing assistance program.

The HomeBASE funding pool, which offers up to \$4,000 in housing and rental subsidies for families on the brink of homelessness, jumped to \$83.4 million this year. Last year, the program's \$21 million pot was drained in three months, cutting off new families from seeking aid even after the Legislature poured \$19 million more into HomeBase in December.

This year, families applying for the program can still receive up to \$4,000 upfront to cover living costs, including rent, for one year. But a memo on this year's budget by the non-partisan Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center called into question "whether \$4,000 in assistance limited to 12 months will be sufficient to help many of these families, who earn very little income, to stay in housing over the long term."

For the second year, the budget shifted millions of dollars from emergency housing options —shelters and motels — into long-term housing support as part of Patrick's housing-first strategy.

Funding for homeless shelters alone dropped \$40 million from the 2012 fiscal year.

A total \$198 million was allocated for HomeBASE, Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) and Massachusetts Rental Voucher System this year. RAFT saw the largest increase of all programs, jumping from \$300,000 to \$8.8 million due to rising demand.

In a controversial move, the Legislature also tightened criteria for individuals and families to enter shelters, admitting only those forced out of housing due to natural disaster or fire, domestic violence, eviction by no fault of their own, or unsafe living conditions.

The restrictions indicate a sweeping shift in housing policy for Massachusetts, one of the top-spending states per capita on housing assistance.

Kelly Turley, director of legislative advocacy for the Massachusetts Coalition on Homelessness, said the limits to shelter access were "pretty shocking."

"To erode the safety net at a time when the economy is so bad, at a time when families are so in need, doesn't make sense," Turley said.

"The current rules are already very restrictive," she said, pointing out that about 50 percent of families who apply to shelters now in Massachusetts are denied.

National housing expert Dennis Culhane countered that narrowing the eligibility for shelters will push people into the state's long-term housing programs instead of waiting in line at shelters, which he called "way stations to nowhere."

"There has to be clear communication to families that there's a better way to be helped than going into the shelter system," said Culhane, a University of Pennsylvania professor who has written extensively on the subject of homelessness. "More people can be helped and more assistance can be directed towards housing."

National evidence supports the housing-first approach of HomeBASE, Culhane said. He added that research has shown families need only about four months of assistance until they are back on their feet.

"This is a very positive and forward step that Massachusetts is taking," he added.

Aaron Gornstein, undersecretary for Housing and Community Development, lauded the first year's progress. HomeBase has helped about 7,000 families from either losing their home or staying long-term in a shelter, he said.

"The goal is to help families stay in the communities where they are," Gornstein said. "We want to do everything we can to keep people in the home they're in if it's a safe situation."

He stressed the program is more cost effective than placing families in motels, which costs the state about \$3,000 without offering stability for that family.

Gornstein said he did not think funding cuts to emergency assistance had "taken away from the services they provide in shelters."

He added, "It's not an either or, you have to do both."

Still, Gornstein said the administration knows how much work lies ahead.

Last year, unexpectedly high demands for emergency housing prompted an extra \$100 million midyear allocation to fund motel stays when shelters breached capacity. There are still about 1,618 families living in motels across the state, according to July 16 figures from the Patrick administration.

"We know there's more that's needed, but we have to work within resource constraints. There are many, many more families that are in need than there are resources," Gornstein said.

Some of the state's housing costs could be offset by the federal government, he said, but new rental assistance has not come from the Capital in more than 10 years.

"We'll keep fighting for resources we need. It would be nice to have a partner in the federal government as well, but that's really been lacking," Gornstein said.

SARAH FERRIS is a writer and editor for Spare Change News

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