



News

Special Report: No Place to Live

The state grapples with the constant and growing problem of homelessness.

By Maureen Turner

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Thursday, October 18, 2012

This summer, the Massachusetts Legislature made sweeping changes to the ways the state aids homeless families.

Some were welcomed by struggling families and their advocates, such as millions in new funding for rental vouchers and housing assistance programs designed to keep families from becoming homeless in the first place.

Such programs are in keeping with the state's preventative "housing-first" focus, said Aaron Gornstein, undersecretary for the Department of Housing and Community Development. "We believe it's so critical to focus on homeless prevention and creating new housing opportunities for these families, rather than [have them] go into emergency shelter," he said.



C.G.P. Grey Photo

But that new funding, advocates say, comes at the expense of the most vulnerable families, those who need immediate shelter. Along with the new funding for housing programs, the fiscal 2013 budget includes tough new restrictions on which families can qualify for emergency shelter.

"The effects are quite devastating, specifically on children and their parents not having a place that's a safe haven to go to," said Robyn Frost, executive director of the Mass. Coalition for the Homeless.

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Families are eligible for emergency shelter if they are residents of Massachusetts, have assets of less than \$2,500 and low incomes (less than \$1,829 monthly, gross, for a family of three), and have at least one dependent child under the age of 21. Pregnant women can also qualify.

In addition, under the new regulations, they must meet at least one of four criteria: they're homeless due to fire, flood or another natural disaster; they're fleeing domestic violence; they're facing eviction through no fault of their own (for instance, being unable to pay rent because of job loss); or they're living in a situation that "exposes children to substantial health and safety risks."

Those regulations were included in the state budget by the Legislature and are being implemented by Housing and Community Development. While the regulations are already in effect, they will not be finalized until sometime in November, after DHCD collects public comments and holds two public hearings. (One of those hearings will be held in Springfield, on Monday, Oct. 22, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. in Room 305 of the state office building at 436 Dwight St.).

Michaelann Bewsee of Springfield's Arise for Social Justice said her group is already seeing the effects of the new regulations. Arise monitors the local DHCD office and finds four or five families each week who've been turned away when they apply for shelter, she said. "There are many more we don't get to," she added.

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The tightness of the new rules means many families are falling through the cracks, Bewsee and other advocates say. By way of example, Bewsee offered the case of a mother of three who had been living in public housing in Chicopee but was evicted after her five-year-old child turned on the oven and caused a fire in a pan. Because they were evicted for cause, the family was not eligible for emergency shelter. They did qualify for financial assistance to get a new apartment, but lost out on one potential place when the landlord learned that they'd been evicted from their previous apartment. The family initially stayed with the mother's sister in Connecticut, then moved in with her boyfriend's mother. But because the boyfriend's mother lives in subsidized housing, she risks eviction herself for taking them in, Bewsee said.

While many homeless families double up with friends or relatives, such arrangements are usually short-lived and unreliable, advocates say. "Those situations tend to be tenuous at best," said Frost, of the Mass. Coalition for the Homeless.

In some cases, such as the one described by Bewsee, taking in another family violates the host family's lease, putting them at risk of losing their home as well. Other times, relatives can put up a family for a short time, but when that time runs out, they're once again homeless. Such situations are especially rough on children, who can find themselves out of school for long stretches of time as their families move from place to temporary place. Numerous studies have shown the long-term negative academic and social consequences suffered by kids who move often because of homelessness, Frost noted.

The state has made some changes to the new regulations in response to public feedback, including allowing families to be eligible for shelter if they've been engaged in what's referred to as "chronic couch surfing," bouncing from one short-term living situation to another. In addition, DHCD has expanded the definition of "domestic violence" to include violence at the hands of any household member, not just an "intimate partner," as previously defined.

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Another provision advocates are eager to see changed: the criterion that allows a family access to shelter if its current situation exposes children to health and safety risks. They'd like that category expanded to include families who are at imminent risk of landing in such circumstances—in other words, ensuring that a family doesn't have to be exposed to unsafe conditions before they can get help.

They'd also like changes to help prevent separation of families. Right now, if a parent can find shelter for her child but not herself—perhaps a grandparent is willing to take in a baby but doesn't have room for the parent—the family does not qualify for shelter, according to Ruth Bourquin, a staff attorney with the Mass. Law Reform Institute, which works on economic and social justice issues.

"All across the commonwealth we're seeing people sleeping in cars and vans. Those are the lucky ones who have cars and vans," Bourquin said. Others are on the streets, she said, or turn up at police stations or hospitals looking for a place to spend the night.

Part of the problem, Bourquin said, is that intake workers seem to assume that families seeking aid don't really need it and that if the requirements to qualify for shelter were tougher, they'd work harder to find a place to stay on their own.

"We hear workers saying that people were abusing the system," she said. "But it's quite rolling the dice, because not everybody does have someone to take them in." And that can lead to tragedies, she added, pointing to the case of a young mother who spent several nights with her toddler in Boston's South Station before being invited to stay with a false "good Samaritan" who ended up raping her. "If they'd put her in shelter as they should have, nothing would have happened," Bourquin said. "It's all so predictable."

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DHCD's Gornstein said that the fiscal 2013 budget represents a positive step forward in how the state helps homeless families.

"We are making the most significant state investment in affordable housing and homeless prevention since the 1980s," Gornstein said. Six million dollars were added to the budget for the Mass. Rental Voucher Program, which will be used to serve more than 500 families in the coming year, according to DHCD. And funding for the Residential Assistance for Families in

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Transition, or RAFT, program was increased dramatically, from \$276,000 last year to \$8,760,000 this year. RAFT tries to prevent families from becoming homeless by offering them up to \$4,000 in a one-year period to catch up on overdue housing or utility bills, or to cover security deposits and other costs associated with a new apartment. Families who qualify for emergency shelter can also participate in the HomeBASE assistance program, which offers up to \$4,000 to get an apartment rather than go into a shelter.

And that, Gornstein said, is a key to the state's strategy: to help families get out of, or avoid ever going into, shelters. There are about 2,000 beds in family shelters across the state, all of them full. The overflow families—about 1,750, according to Gornstein—are housed in motel rooms. That practice has inspired significant political controversy; locally, it became a flashpoint after the 2010 death of an unattended infant who was living with his family in a West Springfield motel.

The average stay for a family in a shelter or motel is eight or nine months, Gornstein said, and the conditions are far from ideal: families living in one room, with no cooking facilities, often isolated from relatives, school and job opportunities. And shelter living isn't just hard on families, he added; it's also expensive, costing about \$3,000 per month per family.

"Our goal is to have zero families in hotels and motels. We're working on that every day," Gornstein said. That includes assistance finding permanent housing and outreach programs that focus on employment and training programs, he said.

Contrary to what advocates for homeless people contend, Gornstein maintains that DHCD is not rejecting families who are in need. "If they're in an emergency situation, they will get into shelter," he said. "You can qualify before you're living in your car."

When an applicant comes to a DHCD office (locally, there are offices in Springfield, Holyoke and Greenfield), a homeless coordinator conducts an intake interview to determine the family's eligibility. If there's an indication that the family is staying in an unsafe place, a trained case worker from the Department of Children and Families promptly does a site visit, according to Gornstein. The department will also grant shelter on a presumptive basis to families that cannot immediately provide the evidence needed to verify their eligibility, he said. Families then have 30 days to provide the missing information.

"We're looking at each case carefully," Gornstein said. "Each situation is different, and we're looking at each family in the fairest way possible. Obviously, we need to verify eligibility. That's always been the obligation of the state agencies that [oversee] this program." If a family is determined to be ineligible for emergency shelter, he said, DHCD refers them to other programs that can help, such as RAFT, or local shelters that don't accept state funds and therefore have broader eligibility rules.

While DHCD is focused on increasing affordable housing options and other homelessness prevention efforts, Gornstein said, "We believe that there is still a strong safety net in place for families that are in emergency situations."

One point on which Gornstein and the critics of the new shelter regulations agree: there's simply not enough affordable housing in Massachusetts to meet the need. Families applying for housing have a long wait; the list for Section 8 vouchers, for example, is 75,000 families deep, Gornstein said.

Massachusetts is working to increase the number of affordable units, he said, pointing to the increased funding for housing programs in the state budget: "The state can't do it alone, though. We need the federal government to provide more resources as well." Local governments and other entities need to help out, too, Gornstein added.

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In Bewsee's view, the state is getting ahead of itself with its new emergency shelter policies. "I think it's very bizarre for the state to have come up with these regulations when we're still in a recession and when there's been no increase in the stock of affordable housing in the state," she said.

"The number of families in shelters and in motels really is disgraceful. We all think there has to be a better way. But until there is that better way, are we going to let women and kids and fathers live in their cars and out on the street? ... We certainly support a housing-first model.

But it has to be real. The housing has to be there."

Bewsee questioned whether political motives are driving the state policies. "If I were really cynical," she said, "I'd say Gov. Patrick wants to say he solved the homeless crisis before he takes on some role in the Obama administration. If you have empty shelters, and you didn't know any better, you might think Massachusetts solved its homeless problem."

Like Bewsee, Bourquin, the MLRI attorney, is happy to see more funds dedicated to preventing homelessness, such as rental assistance programs. But such efforts, she added, do little to help people who are already homeless and don't have adequate income to pay monthly rent. "It's 'housing never' for these families," Bourquin said. More funding for housing is needed, she said, "but, really, on the backs of these children?"

Comments (2)

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Ok, time to bring on the haters: my experiences in a nutshell.

Rents in western mass are abhorrent. Frankly, landlords create a rental shortage, and benefit from it through voucher use. Cranking up rent on a livable apartment, taking a voucher, and the state floats the remainder of the rent due...think this: 1100 for a 600 a month place...tenant pays X amount, state (taxpayer) cuts a check for the remainder. (*cue sob story of maintence and terrible tennents)

Next up, foreclosure crisis feeds the rental shortage directly.

5 college area....landlords LOVE DADDIES MONEY...see first paragraph, only subsitute parents check for rent. (again small percentage of students floating the frieght TOTALLY)

Single no kids and homeless....forget about assistance. Everything is based on PRETAX income. Youre better off NOT WORKING. they cant tax what you dont earn (cue sound of cash register as state pays for your place, food stamps ect) BUT that seemingly happens for those who reproduce/ baby's mommas.

Homeless Vets are a serious issue, Leeds can only do so much. I know three vets couch surfing right now. One of them is on my couch.

As long as there are PRETAX guidelines, there will be working homeless.

Posted by nonya on 10.17.12 at 9:19

Oh and so sorry for all the spelling errors, I FINALLY was able to allow spell check to work on mozilla, so english lit majors, FLAME ON.

Posted by nonya on 10.18.12 at 13:51

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