

**The Road to Nowhere....
Barriers Facing Families in Search of
Shelter**

**Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless
300 Congress St. 5th Floor
Boston, MA 02210
(617) 423-9162**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1999, approximately 21,000 children faced homelessness in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Many of these children, along with their parents, sought entry into the state's emergency shelter system, which is coordinated by the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA). The number of homeless families in the Commonwealth has increased over 26% during the past year as the affordable housing crisis intensified and unemployment figures rose. The growing numbers of homeless families and limited funding have strained the family shelter system, forcing DTA to turn to the use of motels to provide needed shelter. With demand for help outstripping the available shelter space, DTA has tightened eligibility criteria and used delaying tactics to manage an inadequate shelter system.

The Welfare Solidarity Project (WSP), an initiative of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless (MCH), is a direct service project staffed by volunteers that assists families seeking emergency shelter at the Department of Transitional Assistance's (DTA) Boston Family Housing Office located in Grove Hall in Dorchester. Between February and August of 2001, volunteers spent approximately 500 hours in the Grove Hall office completing surveys with families seeking shelter, collecting stories about their experiences, and observing interactions between families and welfare caseworkers. Volunteers spoke with more than 300 families and completed 140 surveys during this time. The data collected have been drawn together to illustrate the barriers facing homeless families applying for Emergency Assistance (EA), the state's shelter system. Percentages and graphs are utilized to provide an understanding of the numbers of families unable to access assistance, but the stories behind these numbers reveal the frustration and desperation experienced by families who have absolutely nowhere to go. It is the state's most vulnerable parents and their children who must bear the brunt of the suffering resulting from DTA's strict policies.

Findings

MCH made the following findings in its study of homeless families' access to emergency shelter:

1. **Shelter applicants with nowhere to go are being turned away from DTA's Boston Family Housing Office despite their eligibility for the shelter program.** These families are turned away from DTA because they are missing a document (such as a birth certificate or social security card) or because DTA refuses to accept alternative verification (such as a Massachusetts driver's license in place of a social security card). Some of these parents and their children sleep in their cars or public places, while others return to living situations that may be unsuitable for children.

2. **Many homeless families are not eligible for shelter under DTA rules.** These families often live in unsafe or unhealthy conditions, but they cannot gain entry into the state's shelter system. There is no information available about what happens to these families.
3. **Families with limited English proficiency (LEP) are often unable to access the shelter program due to a lack of translators and language-appropriate materials.** Despite federal directives that state agencies must provide translators to LEP clients, DTA continues to rely upon children and other inappropriate translators to relay sensitive information.
4. **Shelter clients are not informed of their rights and responsibilities once they gain access to EA.** The consequences for seemingly innocent actions have dire consequences, such as loss of shelter, and it is important for families to receive information about the rules governing shelter utilization.
5. **Almost all families approved for shelter are placed far from their home communities, often in shelters or motels inaccessible by public transportation.** These placements are particularly problematic for families with dire medical needs that require ongoing care; families that are employed and may be forced to quit their jobs; and parents or children with disabilities that require special accommodation.
6. **The DTA relies on motels to house homeless families because shelter spaces in Boston and surrounding communities are full.** A majority of motels have no access to public transportation or grocery stores, exacerbating families' inability to meet their daily needs at a time of great vulnerability.

Recommendations

The findings in this study demonstrate that homeless families encounter seemingly insurmountable obstacles in their struggle to access shelter. These families are already in crisis when they become homeless, and the complexity and unresponsiveness of the shelter system only exacerbates their ordeal. It is imperative that children and their parents with nowhere to go are able to gain entry into shelter when they are most vulnerable. The Department of Transitional Assistance and the Massachusetts legislature should take the following steps to ensure no child in the Commonwealth is left without a safe haven.

1. **DTA should track the number of families deemed ineligible for shelter and the reasons for denials.** If this data shows that a large number of families are left without assistance, the state must reconsider its shelter eligibility policies.
2. **DTA should place families in shelter on the basis of alternative verification or pending verification if the family's living situation is unsafe or the family has nowhere to go.** It is unacceptable for children to sleep on the streets simply because a verification document was not immediately available to the parents.
3. **State agencies should focus upon homelessness prevention.** There are many families that enter the shelter system because they lose their housing due to increased rents, evictions,

and other factors. The Department for Housing and Community Development, DTA, and other relevant state agencies should focus on outreach to low-income agencies to preserve existing housing.

4. **DTA and the legislature should expand shelter placements in homeless families' communities of origin** and particularly Boston, where approximately 40% of the state's homeless families reside before applying for shelter.
5. **DTA should ensure that motel placements are within 15 miles of families' home communities.** DTA must also address the inaccessibility of motel placements and the difficulties families face in purchasing, storing, and preparing food. Families should not be terminated from shelter for 12 months if they are unable to reach a placement.
6. **DTA should provide translators and language-appropriate information to limited English proficient families applying for shelter.** Posters informing families of their right to a translator should be placed in all DTA offices, shelter placement, denial, and termination notices should be generated in the families' own language, and DTA local offices should be held accountable for ensuring translators are available to homeless families applying for shelter.
7. **DTA should provide families with adequate information about the application process and rules governing shelter use.** Easy-to-read flyers should be handed out families informing them of their rights, obligations, and the consequences of specific actions.

INTRODUCTION

Various studies in the last few years have documented the national rise of homelessness in the 1990s and the faces of individuals and families who experience homelessness. The scenario that emerges from nationwide figures are staggering. There are currently 700,000 Americans who are homeless on any given night and up to 2 million people who experience homelessness during a year. About 36% of these homeless are families, and approximately 23% of shelter demand for families went unmet in 2000¹. In Massachusetts, the situation is equally gloomy. Based on figures provided by the McCormack Institute, which has conducted the most thorough research on homelessness in the state, 55,000 people were homeless in the Commonwealth in 1999². Parents and children comprised 58% of this homeless population, with approximately 21,000 children facing homelessness in that year.

The figures above provide a relatively clear picture of the overwhelming numbers of Massachusetts' families who are homeless and require shelter. However, little written documentation exists regarding the substantial obstacles families face to enter the state shelter system. During the last several years, the number of homeless families in need of shelter has increased substantially while the state shelter system has not received adequate funding to meet this demand. As a result, the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), the state agency that coordinates the shelter system, has tightened its eligibility criteria to legally deny families entry into the shelter system despite desperate need. DTA also turns eligible families away repeatedly through bureaucratic mechanisms before allowing them access to shelter. This study provides a detailed description of the obstacles families face in accessing emergency shelter when the system is underfunded and DTA seeks to deflect families' entry into shelter. Data, interviews, and observations recorded over a six-month period at the Boston Family Housing Office, the centralized intake center for all Boston homeless families applying for shelter, are presented here. The findings paint a stark and disturbing portrait of the difficulties families face in accessing state-funded shelter at a time when they are most vulnerable and have nowhere else to turn.

ABOUT THE STUDY

Background

The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless (MCH) is a statewide coalition comprised of more than 2000 members that include homeless families, health centers, shelters, homeless service providers, and concerned citizens. MCH, along with its members, advocates to change legislative and administrative policies that negatively impact homeless families and individuals. The Welfare Solidarity Project (WSP), an initiative of MCH, is a direct service project that assists families seeking emergency shelter at the Department of Transitional Assistance's (DTA) Boston Family Housing Office located in Grove Hall in Dorchester. Because all homeless

¹ The U.S. Conference of Mayors. *A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities 2000*. Published December 2000.

² McCormack Institute of Public Affairs, Center for Social Policy, *A Comparative Portrait of Individuals and Families Utilizing Massachusetts Emergency Shelter Programs, 1999*. Published September 2000.

families in Boston must apply for shelter at Boston Family Housing, this site allows MCH to assist the largest number of families possible through one DTA office. Approximately 30% of all homeless families in Massachusetts lived in the Boston area prior to seeking emergency shelter. Thus, one in three homeless families in Massachusetts seeking shelter apply for EA through Grove Hall³. WSP volunteers, who are primarily from universities and faith-based communities, are trained in the rules governing access to shelter and spend approximately three hours per week at Boston Family Housing advocating for families. There are currently seven WSP volunteers, allowing the project to provide coverage in the welfare office for more than twenty hours per week.

About Emergency Assistance and the Application Process

The EA regulations and the application process for families seeking shelter in Massachusetts are complicated. The EA program is intended for families with children under the age of 21. A pregnant woman with no children is also eligible for EA if she meets all other eligibility criteria. Applicants must show that their income is within 130% of the poverty line and that they have relatively few or no assets. The income limits for families seeking shelter are based on the family’s monthly gross (before taxes) income. These income limits are listed below.

Family Size	Monthly Income Limit for Shelter Applicants
1	\$930.58
2	1257.75
3	1584.91
4	1912.08
5	2239.25
6	2566.41
7	2893.5
8	3220.75
Increment	327.17

A family that meets the financial and assets criteria is not immediately eligible for shelter. Applicants must also demonstrate why they became homeless and that they have absolutely nowhere to go. If they have been evicted from their own apartment or have been living with family or friends, the EA regulations state that families can apply for shelter seven days before impending homelessness. If the family is currently living in an apartment that is unsafe, the Department of Transitional Assistance must verify the inhabitability of the living situation, but families must be placed pending verification of living conditions in order to protect their safety. The regulations also clearly state that a family must be placed immediately despite incomplete documentation if the family has nowhere to go. DTA can then gather the remaining verification while the family is in shelter. If documents prove that the family is not eligible for shelter, DTA can terminate the family.

³ Data taken from a DTA document on the number of shelter applications filed in each DTA office in Massachusetts during 2000 and the first three months of 2001.

Below is a brief list of the criteria for entry into shelter⁴:

- The family has children under the age of 21.
- If no children are present in the household, the applicant is pregnant.
- The family is financially eligible and has few or no assets.
- The family is homeless and has nowhere to go.

Applicants must provide appropriate documents to show they meet these criteria. To prove their identity, families must present a social security card or Massachusetts state identification card. To demonstrate that they have children under the age of 21, applicants must provide birth certificates for each child in the household. Pregnancy is verified through a doctor's letter stating the due date. Financial and assets eligibility is determined through pay stubs, bank statements, and other supporting documentation. Proof of homelessness is varied and includes eviction documents and a letter from family and friends stating that the applicant cannot stay with them. Below is a brief list of some of the documents requested of EA applicants at DTA's Boston Family Housing Office.

- Social Security cards for parents and children
- Children's birth certificates
- Four most recent pay stubs if parent is working
- Assets-related documents (such as bank statements, car valuation, etc.)
- Eviction or foreclosure documents (if relevant)
- Letter from family or friend stating that applicant(s) can no longer stay at their residence (if relevant)

At Grove Hall, applications are not accepted until the day a family is homeless (contrary to the regulatory directive of seven days before homelessness). Although self-verification or alternative verification of eligibility should be acceptable for families in desperate need, Grove Hall rarely places families without all documentation unless an advocate represents the family. After proving financial and assets eligibility and homelessness, a family is still not guaranteed shelter. Applicants must prove that they are homeless for the "right" reasons. These situations will be discussed in the body of the report.

Data Collection

The period of the study is from mid-February to mid-August of 2001. The study consisted of three components. Volunteers completed a short survey of families applying for Emergency Assistance benefits at Boston Family Housing. The survey instrument, which is included in Appendix A, was developed to assess the most pertinent characteristics related to application for Emergency Assistance, such as income, number of children, and current residence. More detailed information regarding family background, employment history, and places of residence were not collected because many families are uncomfortable sharing personal information in the welfare office's waiting room. In addition, most families are under great stress and are in no position to fill out a lengthy questionnaire. Volunteers filled out the surveys as families narrated

⁴ Appendix B lists in detail the various requirements for entry into the EA system.

their stories. If a family was unwilling to answer a particular question, volunteers left that question blank. Only completed surveys, which numbered 140, were used in the final analysis. In addition to the surveys, MCH staff and WSP volunteers noted particular situations encountered by families in a narrative style during the study period. Individual families also shared their stories with staff and volunteers to supplement the surveys and volunteer observations. The information gathered provides a broad picture of the types of families applying for shelter, the situations families face in accessing services, and the recurring obstacles families encounter at Boston Family Housing. The study in no way captures all the complexities inherent in the welfare system serving homeless families. However, the data presented and the stories narrated paint a relatively comprehensive portrait of what a Boston homeless family must go through to enter emergency shelter. It is also clear that the situations Boston families face are not unique. The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless receives dozens of calls per month from desperate parents outside Boston seeking help in accessing emergency shelter.

FINDINGS

Information was collected from 140 families in the waiting room of Boston Family Housing. Results from data collection are presented alongside observations of MCH staff and volunteers who spent a total of 500 hours in the Boston Family Housing Office between February and August of 2001 advocating for families and observing interactions between DTA caseworkers and shelter applicants. The findings are presented below.

FINDING 1:

Many applicants with nowhere to go are being turned away from Boston Family Housing without a written denial. Approximately one in five applicants was placed in shelter as a direct result of advocacy by the Welfare Solidarity Project.

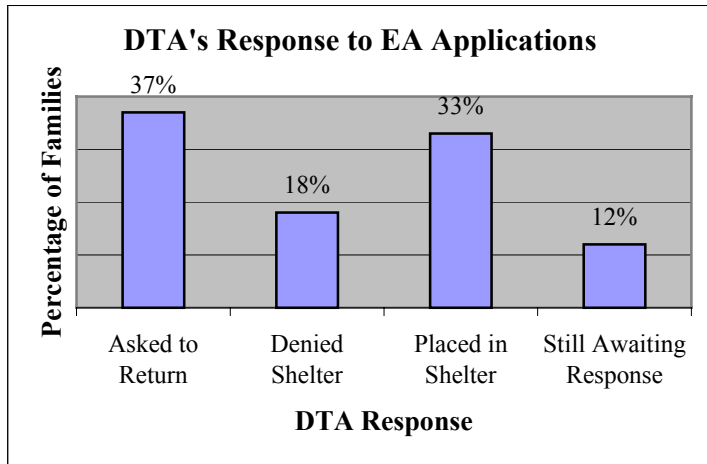
Many families live in unsafe situations as they await shelter.

Eighty five percent (85%) of the families surveyed were homeless and seeking shelter. The other 15% were already in shelter or seeking other services such as housing search or rent arrearages. Many of the homeless families applying for shelter were in a range of living situations at the time of the survey. Almost fifteen percent (13%) of families had spent the previous night on the street or a public place, while 21% of families had stayed in their own apartment, a shelter, or some other accommodation. The largest percentage of families (66%) had spent the previous night with family or friends.

Of the families seeking emergency shelter, only 33% of families were approved and placed in a shelter on the day they were surveyed. Almost twenty percent (19%) of families approved for shelter were placed as a direct result of the Welfare Solidarity Project's intervention. All of these families had been previously sent away or denied shelter before the WSP advocated on their behalf. Approximately one-third (37%) of families were told to return to Boston Family Housing

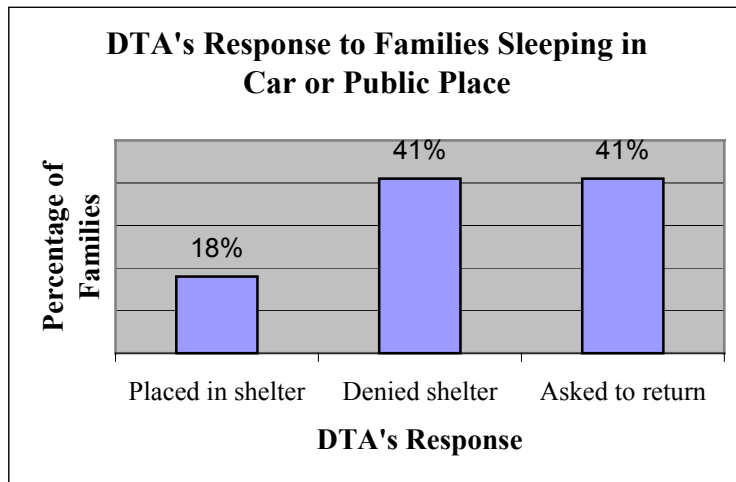
the next day or next week. Some families were asked to bring further documentation such as social security cards, while others were requested to stay with family until space became available. Approximately one in six families were deemed ineligible for shelter. Graph 1 provides a breakdown of DTA response to applications for shelter.

Graph 1



The DTA's response in light of the 13% of families sleeping in their cars or public places is alarming. These children and their parents are dependent upon the state for a safe place to live, and by requesting these families to return with further documentation, the DTA is shirking a

Graph 2



responsibility that is clearly stated in the regulations – a family must be placed in shelter pending verification if they have nowhere to go. Of the families sleeping in their cars or public places, 62% were denied shelter or asked to return with more verification. The remaining 38% of families were placed in shelter. Graph 2 highlights DTA's response to shelter applications from families currently sleeping in their cars or other public places.

Families living with family members or friends were also frequently turned away from Boston Family Housing. It may appear that the 2/3rd of families staying with family members or friends enjoy relatively secure circumstances while awaiting shelter in comparison to those applicants sleeping in their car or in public places. However, many of these families live with relatives who are themselves in subsidized housing and are in danger of losing their apartments if they shelter individuals not on their leases. Other families stay in unsafe conditions that may include

overcrowding, abuse, or harassment. The high rate of families turned away without shelter requires further research regarding the conditions families must reside in while awaiting shelter.

Safety is not the only concern for families awaiting emergency shelter. Perhaps the most difficult problem encountered by parents and their children who are homeless is the constant disruption to their lives. According to a survey conducted by the McCormack Institute with families in shelter, more than 60% of EA families had moved 2-5 times within the twelve months before the survey, while 25% of families had moved at least one time. These moves include those made before entry into emergency shelter. Many families have told Welfare Solidarity Project volunteers that they spent a few weeks each with various aunts, uncles, sisters, and friends for more than six months before finally applying for shelter. This constant disruption in the lives of homeless families seriously compromises the education, health, and well being of children⁵. By turning these applicants away, the DTA exacerbates the instability of these already vulnerable families who have utilized all their social connections before finally applying for shelter.

Homeless families are often turned away for reasons that clearly violate the Emergency Assistance regulations.

Many families are requested to return the following day or even week despite the instability in their lives and the possibility that they may be living in unsafe conditions. Other families know that they will be homeless in a few days and seek to complete an application before they have absolutely nowhere to go. According to the regulations, families can submit an EA application up to seven days before they actually become homeless, allowing both DTA and the family time to gather all needed documentation before the family has nowhere to go. At Grove Hall, DTA caseworkers refuse to allow families to fill out an application even one day before they become homeless. Many of these families then return on the day they require shelter to find that DTA will not place them without another piece of verification.

Maria, a homeless nineteen year old woman in her third month of pregnancy, applied for Emergency Assistance shelter at DTA's Boston Family Housing. DTA informed Maria that she was not eligible for shelter because she is a teenager and is only in her third month of pregnancy. The DTA central office policy division had recently clarified to MCH and other advocacy organizations that DTA is obligated to place non-minor teenagers in any stage of pregnancy into EA shelter if they are otherwise eligible and have nowhere to go. Maria clearly fit this profile and was clearly eligible for shelter. However, Maria was not even given an application and was verbally turned away. Maria left DTA later that morning. Many families in Maria's situation sleep in their cars, but Maria does not own a car. MCH does not know what happened to Maria.

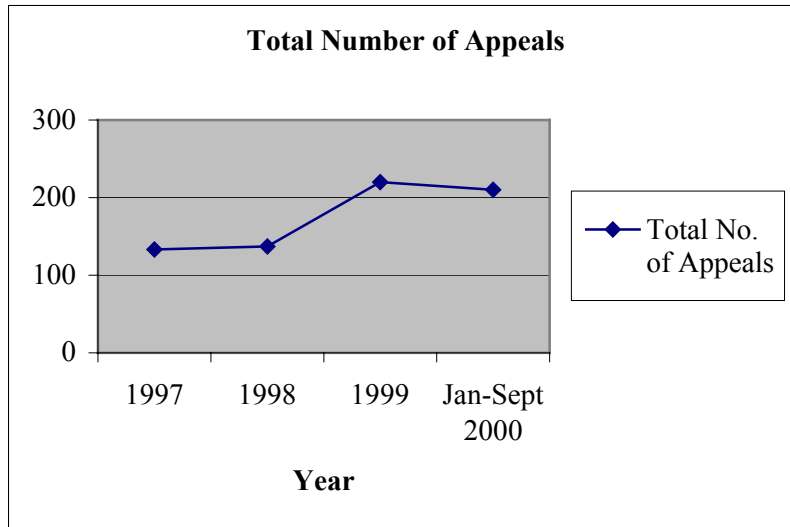
Perhaps most troubling is the figure showing that almost 20% of all families placed in shelter were denied at least one time before receiving advocacy assistance from the Welfare Solidarity Project. Volunteers are not always available at Grove Hall, so the number of eligible families denied shelter could be substantially higher than indicated in the data. One of the implications of this finding is the possible difficulties faced by families applying for shelter outside of Boston. EA eligible families in other parts of the state are also often denied shelter, a fact that is apparent from the dozens of phone calls the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless

⁵ McCormack Institute of Public Affairs. *A Snapshot of Individuals and Families Accessing Boston's Emergency Homeless Shelters*, 1997. Prepared by Donna Haig Friedman, Michelle Hayes, John McGah. August 1997.

receives from non-Boston families struggling to access EA each month. Further study is required to assess exactly how many eligible families are denied shelter throughout Massachusetts.

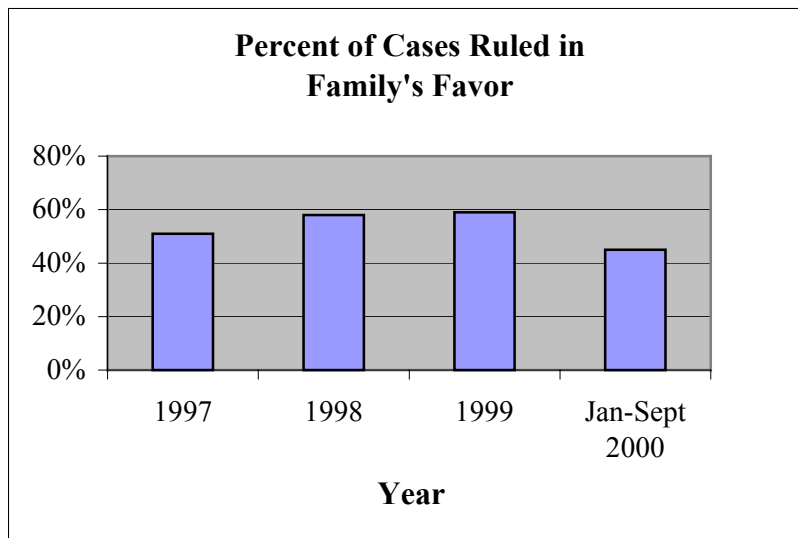
Information from the Division of Hearings regarding the outcomes of appeals for in Massachusetts is available, however. This information demonstrates the number of families who initially received a negative decision by DTA, including shelter denial and termination from shelter, and appealed. These families file an appeal with the Division of Hearings, which

Graph 3



rules whether the family's appeal claim is valid. The graphs below show the number of families who appealed their shelter decision during the last few years and the percentage of families who won the appeal process⁶.

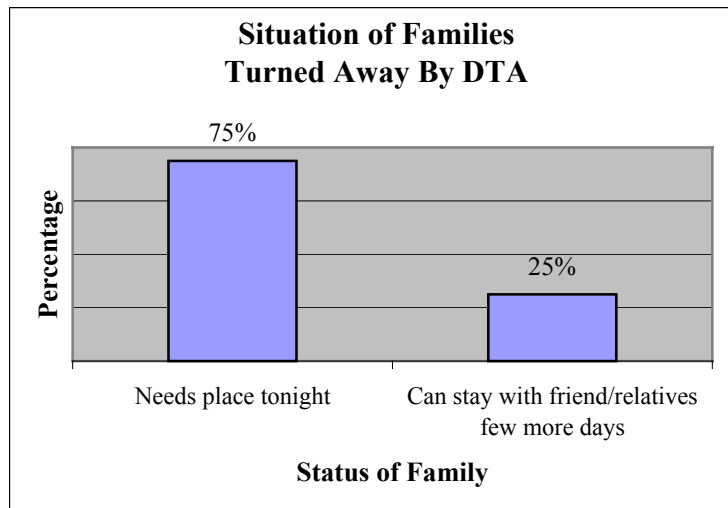
Graph 4



⁶ Data from the Department of Transitional Assistance, Division of Hearings, Appeals List.

The graphs above clearly show that at least half of all families in Massachusetts who appealed a negative decision from DTA won their case on appeal. This data does not provide specific information on the number of families who won appeals on shelter denials, but the high rate of DTA decisions that are overturned on appeal implies that families attempting to access shelter may also be initially rendered a denial. This data, together with the survey, paints a disturbing picture of the number of families who are inadequately assisted by DTA. The 32% of surveyed families turned away from Boston Family Housing supposedly lacked required documentation. The most common documents requested by caseworkers were a “kick out letter” from family or friends with whom the Emergency Assistance applicant was staying, a social security card, and two pay stubs if the applicant is employed. The EA regulations explicitly state that a family in immediate need of shelter must be placed on the same day based on verbal verification of homelessness if the family has nowhere to go. Remaining documentation can be gathered after shelter placement.

Graph 5



According to the survey data, 75% of families who were asked to return the following day or week needed shelter that night. The remaining 25% of families could stay with friends or relatives for another night or few days. It is not clear where families turned away from DTA stay while awaiting shelter placement. They may be forced to return to homes where they are unwanted or to relatives facing imminent eviction from their own apartment. Other families may end up sleeping in their cars or public places. Graph 5 demonstrates the situation of families

turned away from DTA without shelter.

Allison, the mother of four children who applied for shelter at DTA’s Boston Family Housing, provided all of her documentation to DTA with the exception of two of her children’s social security cards. After waiting for several hours, Allison was informed by DTA that she should return only after obtaining the remaining social security card for her children. It was already 3 pm, and Alison would be unable to secure the cards and return to Boston Family Housing in time to be placed in shelter that evening. Allison stated repeatedly that she had absolutely nowhere to stay and would be forced to sleep on the streets if DTA did not place her in shelter. Despite regulations stating that seemingly eligible families with immediate need should be placed in shelter using alternate verification or pending verification, Allison was turned away from DTA. The WSP volunteer attempted to find a non-DTA funded shelter placement for Allison and her children, but no spaces were available. MCH does not know what happened to Allison and her children.

The majority of families awaiting shelter are currently housed with family or friends. The “kick out” letter is requested from all of these applicants. The logic behind this piece of verification is that families must show they are homeless and have absolutely nowhere to stay. Many applicants provide this letter with their initial application but other families may be unaware that they must provide proof of homelessness.

Despite DTA's obligation to place a family in shelter if they have nowhere to go based upon self or other verification of homelessness pending receipt of the documentation, Boston Family Housing refuses to even call family members to verify homelessness. Many of these families are then forced to find alternative housing, sometimes ending up in their cars or hospital emergency rooms.

DTA also requests proof of income because EA is only available to families at 130% of the poverty limit. Again, the EA guidelines clearly state that documentation such as an employer's letter suffice to prove income. However, the DTA regularly requires the applicant's two most recent pay stubs. The EA regulations state that if a family's current or past income has been reduced, the DTA must use prospective income to determine eligibility. In cases where applicants have begun a new job or reduced their work hours, appropriate pay stubs are unavailable. In these situations, the DTA requires families to return with two pay stubs reflective of income, usually available only after one full month of employment, instead of placing families immediately. Many applicants provide letters from employers verifying their change in income, but Boston Family Housing often refuses to accept these letters. Again, the family is forced to continue living in precarious circumstances for two weeks or even a month before they can access shelter if they are otherwise eligible

Evelyn, a mother of three children, who works part time at a minimum wage job, has been homeless for several months now, living with various family members throughout Boston. After approximately six months of doubling up with family and friends, Evelyn had utilized all the resources available to her. She and her children slept in her car for several days before Evelyn finally applied for EA. Evelyn had only two pay stubs when she applied for shelter and was told to return with four pay stubs. Since Evelyn had nowhere to go that night, a volunteer from the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless insisted that Boston Family Housing accept alternate or self-verification. DTA agreed to accept a letter from Evelyn's employer stating her monthly income. However, her employer failed to fax the information to DTA even after three phone calls. Evelyn finally asked DTA to call the employer to verify her income, stating that she was definitely within the income limit for shelter. DTA refused, and in fact, the assistant director stated that "We never place families in shelter pending income verification." Evelyn was forced to leave DTA and sleep in her car with her children another night until she could provide four pay stubs.

Non-English, non-Spanish speaking applicants face linguistic obstacles in accessing shelter.

Shelter applicants represent a diverse population ranging from Vietnamese to Somali to Cape Verdean families. WSP volunteers have noticed that many applicants must bring their own translators to their application interview because DTA does not inform families that they have the right to a DTA-provided translator if they wish. On several occasions, WSP volunteers have witnessed families who were not interviewed for shelter because no translator was available. Many families depend upon their children to translate. The interview addresses sensitive issues such as domestic violence, income, and substance abuse. Parents may feel uncomfortable relaying such information through their children. The issue of cultural and linguistic barriers is particularly important in light of the findings of other studies on shelter access. According to the McCormack Institute, cultural and linguistic minorities, and especially Asian and Pacific

Islander families, are unable to access shelter due to these barriers. Community-based organizations that serve homeless families of Asian background reported to the McCormack Institute that 75% of the families they serve fail to access shelter even in times of critical need due to cultural and linguistic barriers⁷.

Marguerite, the mother of an infant, applied for shelter in early August 2001 through the Boston Family Housing Office in Grove Hall, Dorchester.

Marguerite, who speaks only French, applied for shelter with the assistance of her brother, who speaks very limited English. Unable to communicate effectively with her DTA caseworker, Marguerite could not explain to her caseworker that she had no food. The DTA often provides canned food to families in need when they are initially placed in shelter. Marguerite did not eat for her first 48 hours in shelter. Finally, MCH provided her with a week's worth of food. Marguerite has been unable to communicate with her DTA caseworker since her placement. She wants to begin searching for an apartment but has not been informed by DTA that housing search services are available to her. Marguerite is extremely frustrated with her inability to communicate with her caseworker. For several days she stopped answering the telephone because she knew she would be unable to communicate with the caseworker. If DTA transfers her to another hotel or shelter, asks her to begin doing housing search, or requests her to fulfill other requirements, she will be unable to understand the instructions and could face a noncompliance or termination.

FINDING 2:

Many homeless families are deemed ineligible for shelter by DTA. There is no information available about what happens to these families.

Families deemed ineligible for shelter usually have very few options.

Families' inability to access shelter is a growing problem throughout the state. The McCormack Institute has demonstrated that the numbers of homeless families receiving shelter through private sources has more than doubled between 1997-2000. Families in privately funded shelter represented 11 percent of sheltered homeless families in 1997 and 19 percent in 2000⁸. Not captured in this data is the severe shortage of non-EA shelter spaces. There are fewer than forty non-EA spaces, known as community rooms, throughout the entire state Massachusetts. These community rooms are almost always full, leaving desperate families who are ineligible for EA shelter with few or no options. Eighteen percent (18%) of homeless families in the sample were deemed ineligible for shelter by DTA.

Over Income

⁷ McCormack Institute of Public Affairs. *A Snapshot of Individuals and Families Accessing Boston's Emergency Homeless Shelters, 1997*. Prepared by Donna Haig Friedman, Michelle Hayes, John McGah. August 1997.

⁸ A Collaboration among public policy institutes at the University of Massachusetts Boston. *After Welfare Reform: Trends in Poverty and Emergency Service Use in Massachusetts*. Donna Haig Friedman, Randy Albelda, Elaine Werby, and Michelle Kahan. June 2001

Approximately one quarter (27%) of the ineligible families were denied shelter because they were over income. Families that are over income face a seemingly impossible “catch-22”. The applicant must generally quit her job or reduce her working hours to qualify for shelter. If she does not, she remains ineligible for shelter. If she does lower her income, she will struggle to meet her family’s transportation, food, and other needs. Families denied shelter often have absolutely nowhere to go.

Nonpayment of Rent for Subsidized Housing

As mentioned in the introductory sections of the report, families are also deemed ineligible for shelter based on other criteria besides those listed. Eviction from subsidized housing for nonpayment of rent is one of the reasons that families can be denied shelter for up to 12 months after the eviction. In this study sample, 41% of ineligible applicants were denied shelter because they had been evicted from subsidized housing for nonpayment of rent. On the face of it, it may seem logical on DTA’s part to exclude these families from shelter because they possessed a subsidy and did not meet their rent obligations. However, the stories of these families’ struggles are compelling and fly in the face of DTA’s logic. These families often lose subsidized housing for reasons outside their control, and DTA’s punitive measures leave these parents with nowhere to turn. The stories below illustrate the often impossible situations faced by families who have been evicted from subsidized housing for nonpayment of rent and seek shelter.

Carrie, a nursing assistant, is the mother of a five-year-old son.

Her mother, who is manic-depressive, kicked out Carrie's 10-year old sister. Carrie agreed to become guardian to her sister, who needed a great deal of attention in the transition to her new home. As a result, Carrie missed many days of work during this period until she was finally asked to leave her job at a doctor's office. Carrie fell behind in her rent, then took a job at a clothing store to attempt to make up the missed rent payments. However, she had fallen too far behind in her rent payments and was evicted from the subsidized housing where she had lived for six years. Carrie applied for shelter at Boston Family Housing but was deemed ineligible. Currently, Carrie resides with her mentally ill mother, who is also in subsidized housing. She will be unable to stay with her mother for very long, but it is unclear where she can turn for help.

Gina is homeless. She currently undergoes dialysis for kidney failure and has custody of her three grandchildren, whose mother died some time ago.

Because she received a state cash assistance payment for her grandchildren after gaining custody, the housing authority increased her rent payment level. Gina's cash grant was consumed by her grandchildren's food and clothing needs, and she fell behind on her rent. She was evicted from public housing for nonpayment of rent. Gina lived with her eldest daughter for a while, but her daughter's landlord requested that she and her grandchildren leave immediately. She called Boston Family Housing and was told over the phone that she would not qualify for shelter because of her circumstances. Gina was offered housing for individuals with kidney failure, but her grandchildren cannot live in this housing. Gina does not wish to split up from her grandchildren, who have already been traumatized by their mother's death. She called MCH several times to request assistance, but MCH staff could not find her a non-EA shelter placement. MCH staff do not know how Gina fared or where she is currently staying.

Rejecting or Abandoning a Placement

Fourteen percent of families denied shelter in the sample were reapplying for EA after termination from motel placements. This group constitutes families unable to reach their motel placement, who are considered to have rejected a placement, and families who leave placements due to job or other commitments. Under the regulations, families who lose shelter for these reasons are ineligible for 12 months. During the last several months, the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless has received calls from many families throughout the state faced with the impossible choice of refusing shelter or quitting their jobs. Many of these families are terminated from shelter for deciding to retain the job that will eventually assist them in paying for

Eliza, the mother of four children, refused a motel in New Bedford because she wanted to keep her job.

Eliza had previously utilized welfare but had reached her time limit. She entered a job at DTA's urging and had been doing relatively well until she lost her housing due to an increase in rent. When she applied for shelter, Boston Family Housing caseworkers told Eliza to quit her job. She protested that her welfare caseworker had urged her to find a job and that she was ineligible for TAFDC due to the time limit. The DTA caseworker terminated Eliza from shelter when she refused to accept a placement that would force her to leave her job. Eliza is not alone.

permanent housing.

Welfare Solidarity Project volunteers met Sarah, the mother of one child who was placed in a Matapoisset motel.

Sarah requested transportation assistance from DTA but was informed that assistance could not be provided. She left to pick up her child from school and to ask friends or family members if they could take her to Matapoisset. Sarah was unable to reach the motel and was forced to sleep in a hospital emergency room with her child. The next morning she went back to Grove Hall, where she was told she had been terminated from shelter for rejecting a placement. Sarah attempted to explain her situation to the DTA worker but was simply handed a termination letter. Sarah again spent the following night at a hospital emergency room. The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless is uncertain of where she and her child are now staying.

Some families lose shelter for 12 months because DTA does not provide adequate information about the rules governing shelter use.

Lack of information holds deleterious consequences for families placed in shelter. DTA often fails to inform families about repercussions attached to specific actions. For example, a family may be placed in a motel and then find the motel unacceptable upon reaching there because it is dirty or very far from a job or children's schools. The family leaves the placement then returns to DTA the next day to request an alternative placement. These families then lose their shelter

Anna and her families faced serious consequences due to the lack of information provided her at the time of her placement.

She is the mother of three children ages 14, 7, and 3. In early 2000, Anna and her children became homeless after she experienced harassment from her landlord and decided to leave the apartment. The Department of Transitional Assistance placed Anna in a motel more than 20 miles from her home community of Dorchester. After Anna was approved for shelter, she requested explanations from her caseworkers about the various documents she was signing. Her caseworker stated that she had a doctor's appointment and did not have time to explain the forms. Desperate for shelter, Anna quietly signed the forms. She and her children finally arrived at the far-away motel placement at 7 pm only to find urine stains on the bed and cigarette butts in the bathroom. Concerned that the conditions might be unsafe for her children, particularly one of her daughters with asthma, Anna called a friend to ask if she and her children could stay for the night. Anna returned to the DTA office early the next morning only to be told that she was terminated from EA because she had rejected a placement. Aghast, Anna complained that her caseworker had not informed her of this provision and that she would have stayed at the motel if she realized she would lose her shelter benefits. Anna appealed the termination but eventually lost the appeal.

benefits because the DTA worker judges them as having refused a placement. Many families, if informed of the consequences of certain actions, would alter their decisions.

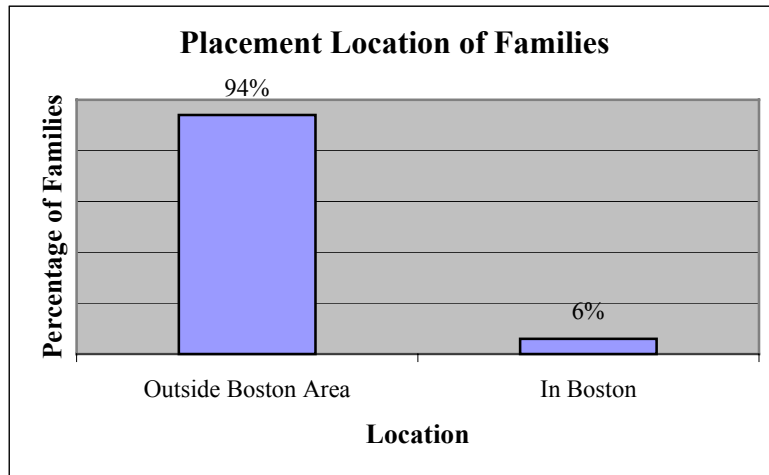
No information is available regarding how many families that apply for shelter in Massachusetts are denied.

Many EA applicants and clients face the predicaments encountered by families described above. In fact, the 18% of the survey sample denied shelter is probably only a small portion of all homeless families in Massachusetts ineligible for shelter. MCH regularly receive calls from parents throughout the state who are deemed ineligible for shelter, but it is impossible to know what ultimately happens to these families. Boston area health workers, with whom families often keep in touch even after a shelter denial, state that many ineligible families live in very hazardous conditions. Some of these families are forced to live with abusive family members or in their cars. MCH, along with other agencies, has requested information from DTA regarding the number of families denied shelter and the reasons for these denials. DTA states that this information is currently unavailable though this type of information is contained in client files since DTA issues denial notices to ineligible applicants.

FINDING 3:
Almost all families approved for EA are placed far from their home communities. Families are terminated from EA shelter if they are unable to reach a placement.

Almost all surveyed families (94%) approved for Emergency Assistance were placed outside the Boston area. DTA does not provide transportation or other services to families placed far from their home communities. The graph below shows the percentage of families surveyed according to their location of placement.

Graph 6



Families placed outside Boston are usually placed in motels, which DTA utilizes when shelters are full, or shelters as far away as Springfield. These distant placements give rise to several issues that impede families' ability to carry out their daily responsibilities. More than half (56%)

Melissa was pregnant and applied for shelter at Boston Family Housing. She was placed in a motel more than forty miles outside the Boston area. She worried that she would be unable to access appropriate medical care when she gave birth, especially because she had a high-risk pregnancy. A day before her due date, Melissa became afraid that she was about to have her baby and went to her Boston-based hospital's emergency room. She stayed there two nights before returning to DTA. She was told that she had been terminated for abandoning shelter. Melissa is currently appealing the termination.

of surveyed families placed outside Boston had children who attended Boston area schools. According to health center workers in the Boston area, who have formed long-term relationships with families, many of these children have special health and educational needs that are serviced through their local hospitals, schools, and health clinics. The move to far away locations disrupts families' access to services, and in some cases, jeopardizes children's health. The interruptions in their daily schedule that families encounter as a result of long distances in motel or shelter placements is further exacerbated by DTA's practice of transferring EA families among placements.

The Massachusetts legislature requires that families be placed in shelter within twenty miles of their home community unless local shelters are full. Many of the shelters are at capacity. In this case, DTA is responsible for transferring the family back into their community as soon as possible. However, DTA has recently initiated a new administrative policy requiring the cases of families placed outside the Boston area to be transferred to the local office in which the family now resides. For example, if a Boston family is placed in a shelter in Worcester, the family's

case is transferred to the Worcester local office instead of being handled by Boston Family Housing. Advocates, both in and outside Boston, are now reporting that local offices do not assertively seek to move families back into the Boston area. As a result, Boston families languish in far away shelters for weeks or even months.

FINDING 4:

The DTA relies on motels to house homeless families because shelter spaces in Boston and surrounding communities are full. A majority of motels have no access to public transportation or grocery stores.

There are currently more than 300 EA families dispersed in various motels around Massachusetts. The DTA utilizes motels because shelters are full. The motels are intended as a temporary measure until a shelter space opens up, but there are currently families who stay in motels for upwards of three months. Many of the motels utilized by DTA are 15 or more miles outside the Boston area and are inaccessible by public transportation. The legislature has mandated that families must be placed in motels within 15 miles of their home communities unless no closer motels are available. DTA routinely states that Boston-area motels are unwilling to house EA families, a claim that cannot be easily verified. Perhaps the most problematic aspect of families' placement in motels is the difficulty these families face in accessing transportation and food. DTA does not provide transportation vouchers for families to commute to and from the motels. Volunteers commonly meet families at Grove Hall who are unable to reach their placement because they do not have the money to take a train and then a cab to the motel. The distance also precludes daily attempts to search for housing or go to work.

Richard is the father of a six-year-old boy who is handicapped and has serious health issues.

Richard, who was laid off from his marketing job at the start of the economic downturn, is also searching for work to support himself and his son. He does not receive cash assistance or food stamps from the state. He was placed in a motel in Peabody after he became homeless due to job loss. Each morning, Richard spends fifteen dollars on a cab to reach Salem. He then spends several more dollars to purchase train tickets into Boston, where he conducts his job search and takes his son to doctor appointments. By the time he returns to Peabody, Richard has spent more than thirty dollars on transportation. I'm not sure what to do, he told us. I've almost used up my savings and I've been down in Peabody for a week. If they don't move me to Boston soon, I'm not going to have any money left.

Richard also faces another serious predicament shared by many families placed in motels. He is a male, and many shelters throughout the state do not accept boys or men above the age of 12. In fact, approximately one in five families (20.4%) surveyed at Boston Family Housing had boys above the age of twelve. Many of these families are forced to stay in motels for months before a shelter is willing to accept them. Some of these families are never transferred into a shelter. MCH staff and volunteers recently met a family in Peabody with a teenage boy and a father who had been in the motel for five months. Their housing and job search had come to a halt because they had depleted their funds and were unable to pay for transportation costs.

Another common problem faced by families in motels is access to food. Many families apply for emergency food stamps at the time of their shelter application, and food stamp applications may take 2-6 days to approve. In some cases, families are still waiting for their food stamps more than two weeks after placement. The DTA office sometimes provides a day or two worth of food at the time of initial placement, but the low income of families in motels makes it difficult for them to buy further supplies of food without food stamps. Most motels are not close to supermarkets, forcing families to go hungry or to spend money on fast food. Also, because motel rooms often do not have refrigerators or microwaves, families are unable to store and prepare food. At the motel in Peabody, MCH staff met families that had run out of food but were unable to pay for a cab to the grocery store. These families depend upon food deliveries made by MCH each week, but sometimes this food is only enough to last a family for a few days. Certainly, hunger is a serious issue for families placed in motels.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings in this study demonstrate that homeless families encounter seemingly insurmountable obstacles in their struggle to access shelter. These families are already in crisis when they become homeless, and the complexity and unresponsiveness of the shelter system only exacerbates their ordeal. It is imperative that children and their parents with nowhere to go are able to gain entry into shelter when they are most vulnerable. The Department of Transitional Assistance and the Massachusetts legislature should take the following steps to ensure no child in the Commonwealth is left without a safe haven.

1. DTA should track the number of families deemed ineligible for shelter and the reasons for denials.

- ◆ Families deemed ineligible for EA generally have no other avenues for accessing shelter, compromising the health and safety of children and their parents. Currently, neither the state nor advocates have any idea of how many Massachusetts families are denied shelter each year.
- ◆ The legislature should direct DTA to collect monthly data on the number of families deemed ineligible for shelter at each DTA office throughout the state and the reasons for these denials.
- ◆ A study should also be conducted to determine the impact of these denials on the health and safety of the parents and children.
- ◆ If this data demonstrates that large numbers of families are being denied shelter services and face negative consequences, it is imperative that the Commonwealth takes some action to shelter these children and their parents.

2. DTA should place families in shelter pending verification if the family's living situation is unsafe or the family has nowhere to go.

- ◆ More than 1/3 of families surveyed were sent away from Boston Family Housing to gather further documentation. Many of these families have nowhere to go and must struggle through each night until they are placed in shelter.

- ◆ The DTA should follow its own regulations of placing families immediately based on available verification if the family is living in unsafe conditions or has nowhere to go.
- ◆ Shelter benefits can be withdrawn from families who do not provide verification within 30 days after placement.
- ◆ DTA should improve job training and monitor worker compliance with regulations. DTA workers should not be able to arbitrarily turn families away despite agency-mandated rules to ensure standardization of homelessness services.

3. State agencies should focus upon homelessness prevention.

- ◆ The homeless prevention initiatives contained in the Senate’s version of the Omnibus Housing Package should be included in the conference committee’s final package. The bill includes a variety of provisions to help low-income families preserve their existing housing such as directing the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) to prioritize otherwise eligible families and individuals for state housing resources if they received a stay execution for a no-fault eviction; requiring DHCD and DTA to work with advocates to develop and distribute materials to low-income residents about available homeless prevention resources and how to access them; and creating a centralized application process for applying for low-income housing in Massachusetts.
- ◆ The legislature should allocate \$4 million in the State budget for Residential Assistance to Families in Transition (RAFT) program. This program would provide homeless and at-risk families with funds to help them obtain or retain housing that would otherwise not be available to them. Up to \$3000 in flexible funds would be available to families under 40% of the area median income as a one-time benefit.

4. DTA and the legislature should expand shelter placements in homeless families’ communities of origin and particularly Boston, where approximately 40% of the state’s homeless families reside before applying for shelter.

- ◆ A majority of families that apply for shelter through Boston Family Housing are placed far from their home communities due to a lack of available shelter space.
- ◆ The legislature should increase funding for EA shelter in the budget instead of through supplemental budgets. This would provide upfront funding with which DTA could plan ahead for increased shelter space instead of staggered funding that must be used for immediate need such as motels.
- ◆ In expanding shelter space, DTA should increase the number of scattered site and apartment type congregate shelter, both of which are easier to site and could be instituted more quickly than general group (congregate) shelter.

5. DTA should ensure that motel placements are within 15 miles of families’ home communities. DTA must also address the inaccessibility of motel placements and the difficulties families face in purchasing, storing, and preparing food. Families should not be terminated from shelter for 12 months if they are unable to reach a placement.

- ◆ Currently, the legislature requires that DTA place families in motels within 15 miles of their home communities unless no other space is available. The legislature should

monitor DTA compliance with the 15-mile rules and hold an independent investigation into DTA claims that closer placements are unavailable.

- ◆ Legislative pressure should also be placed upon DTA to ensure that families in placements more than 15 miles outside their home communities are transferred to closer locations as soon as possible.
- ◆ Families' food and transportation needs must also be taken more seriously. All motel placements should be close to grocery stores and DTA should require motel owners to provide families with microwaves and refrigerators. Emergency food stamps should be issued the same day to families unable to afford food.
- ◆ Motels utilized for shelters should be close to public transportation and the legislature should mandate transportation services or vouchers upon initial placement so that families can reach motels. DTA rules should be changed so that families unable to reach a placement are not terminated from shelter for twelve months.

6. DTA should provide translators and language-appropriate information to limited English proficient families applying for shelter.

- ◆ It is unacceptable for linguistic and cultural minorities to be unable to access shelter due to lack of translators. The DTA should increase the number of multilingual staff able to assist non-English, non-Spanish speaking families through the process of applying for and entering shelter.
- ◆ For families who speak languages other than those spoken by caseworkers, interpreters should be provided to help the family through the application process, explain the rules governing shelter use, and answer any questions the family may have.
- ◆ Materials such as applications, documents explaining shelter regulations, and notices should be made available to families in their own language.

7. DTA should provide families with adequate information about the application process and rules governing shelter use.

- ◆ Families in shelter do not have alternative places to live. It is imperative that DTA informs families about their rights and responsibilities when they enter shelter so that they can make informed choices.
- ◆ Families should be informed in advance of actions that could lead to shelter ineligibility since losing shelter will place children's well being at risk for a full year.
- ◆ DTA is considering distributing easy to read documents explaining the rules governing shelter use to families upon acceptance into shelter. DTA should provide families with this information to ensure that families do not lose shelter due to lack of information.