

STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

MIX OF OPTIMISM, CONCERN IN BAKER BUDGET FOR HOMELESS

By Andy Metzger

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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, MARCH 5, 2015.....Lawmakers who will decide this spring and summer how billions of state dollars should be spent heard on Thursday from people who have had to search for shelter.

Pamela Fleuriel, who attended a homelessness lobbying day at the State House, told the News Service she started a semester at North Shore Community College last fall when she was completely homeless.

"I literally had no place to go," said Fleuriel, 30, explaining she slept at the Downtown Crossing subway station and other places last fall until a stranger offered her a place to stay.

Lobbyists and activists presented lawmakers with a number of different priorities, seeking funding for rent assistance, asking for \$4 million for homeless youth and \$185.4 million for shelters and emergency services for families - which the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless claims would match the anticipated spending level in fiscal 2015.

"I think we need more shelters. I think we need more diverse shelters that are specific to different groups of people," Fleuriel told the News Service. She said, "How come there's no student shelter? How come I can't find a place at 10 o'clock at night to sleep? I'm a full-time student. I don't do anything wrong that would keep me out of a place. I'm not disruptive, anything like that."

Gov. Charlie Baker, who included \$44 million for emergency shelters in a midyear spending bill he filed Friday, hopes to reduce and eventually need for emergency housing at hotels, motels and shelters. He said his fiscal 2016 budget proposal would level fund family homeless prevention programming next year.

"They're always full," Debra Fox, who is also a student at North Shore Community College, told the News Service about shelters. Fox said she was foreclosed on in July and has been staying at a rooming house. She said, "I'm struggling."

Fox, who stressed the importance of community, also said she believes those making use of shelter services should be given some responsibilities. She said, "You shouldn't just let people be in shelters doing nothing."

Baker has proposed moving resources into a \$20 million fund that could use flexible fixes for families in housing trouble before they need to enter the shelter system.

Sen. Jamie Eldridge, an Acton Democrat, said he was "encouraged" that Baker proposed increasing funding by more than \$5 million for rental vouchers, but warned that the governor's budget includes "severe restrictions" on access to shelter.

According to the Baker administration, in keeping with a policy known as presumptive placement, people will not be turned away from shelters during a 30-day window, though the state will aim to connect families in trouble with resources aside from homeless shelters and the motels that serve as temporary homeless shelters.

Eldridge told the News Service Baker's budget would drop two conditions used to qualify families for shelter access. Those are families who are chronically "couch-surfing" and families staying in a unit that does not meet sanitary standards.

"I am very concerned that a protection that was already weakened over the past couple of years would be further weakened," Eldridge said. The budget would in fiscal 2016 suspend regulations that make families eligible for those reasons. Kelly Turley, lobbyist for the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, said other living situations, like sleeping in a car, would still qualify a family for shelter under Baker's plan.

"The administration has proposed aggressive strategies to meet families at 'the front door' of emergency assistance and find the best resources for their needs, which is meant to reduce the number of people placed in shelters and concentrate on delivering appropriate resources for the unique service needs of each family," Elizabeth Guyton, Baker's press secretary, said in a statement.

Fleuriel said this fall she was "curling up to go to sleep on a bench" outside Haymarket when a man asked her for a cigarette and later gave her a room to stay rent-free. Fleuriel said he is a 65-year-old "gentleman" who didn't want to live alone.

"I took a chance," Fleuriel said. She said the first week she stayed there, "I was petrified going to sleep, but I didn't know what to do. It was cold out."

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