

# Baker's plan for homeless concerns advocates

By **Joshua Miller** | GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 15, 2015

Governor Charlie Baker has proposed narrowing eligibility for state-funded emergency housing, a move that advocates for homeless families warn could leave some of Massachusetts' most vulnerable on the streets.

Baker administration officials say their push is part of a broader effort to find long-term housing for struggling families, ideally getting them support they need to get on their feet and avoid ever being shuttled into a shelter or motel. They say many families would qualify under other criteria, and those who are truly in need wouldn't be turned away.

But while many advocates for the homeless laud the intent and the administration's overall approach to homelessness, they voice sharp worry about tightening eligibility and the effect the change — embedded in a bill lawmakers are likely to consider this month — could have on the thousands of families who seek state-backed housing every year.

A recent e-mail from the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless encouraging supporters to contact their legislators decries what it calls the “Draconian” eligibility changes proposed by Baker.

Restricting access to emergency housing could put families at risk, and the proposed shift “feels like it would be very dangerous” because some people “simply don't have any other option,” said Libby Hayes, executive director of

Homes for Families, a nonprofit that aims to end homelessness in Massachusetts.

Baker has pledged to reduce the number of families in hotels and motels to zero before the end of his first term. On Tuesday, there were 1,259 families in hotels and motels, down from 1,500 when he took office in January. There were also 3,233 families in shelters on Tuesday.

Baker's proposal would suspend the criteria used to approve roughly 40 percent of families who received emergency housing in the first half of this year. Those in irregular overnight sleeping situations, repeatedly moving from place to place in a short period of time, and those living in units considered "unfit for human habitation" would no longer be eligible. The Democratic-controlled Legislature already rejected a similar proposal to narrow eligibility in Baker's full-year spending plan, and there are indications that it may also reject the current effort, which would temporarily narrow who can qualify for emergency shelter through June 2016.

Senator Karen E. Spilka, a Democrat from Ashland who is chairwoman of the Senate Committee on Ways and Means, cheered the Baker administration's aim of getting families out of hotels and motels, but said she is probably "reluctant" to restrict eligibility.

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 shelter.

Massachusetts provides about 3,500 shelter beds. When those are full, the state puts homeless families in hotels and motels at an average cost of about \$106 per night.

Families are defined as a pregnant woman or parents with children under age 21.

Individuals have no right to housing but can find a place to sleep at shelters such as the Pine Street Inn in Boston.

Advocates, legislators, and the Baker administration agree that hotels and motels are often a woefully inadequate option for housing families. They say that type of lodging often separates families from the social support of relatives and friends, familiar schools, a clean place for children to play, easy access to public transportation, and kitchen equipment such as a refrigerator and stove.

In a joint interview, Jay Ash and Marylou Sudders, Baker's secretaries of housing and economic development and health and human services, respectively, outlined the effort to address the scourge.

They said they have ramped up communication and collaboration between their agencies, working so that the state provides a family in need with not just shelter but also the resources to deal with the underlying situation that may have caused them to become homeless.

Department of Public Health employees are going into shelters and screening people to find out what their specific struggles might be — from depression to substance abuse — and then connecting them with help, Sudders said.

The secretaries said they are pressing more families eligible for emergency shelter to take advantage, instead, of a program that allots up to \$8,000 to help pay for rent, utilities, deposits, and other expenses associated with housing so families can stay in a home.

And, the officials said, the administration is working to change rules that tend to force families into emergency shelter before they can access housing “supports,” such as working with a local provider who is an expert in the housing market to find an affordable home.

The officials framed the proposal to narrow eligibility as part of that effort to help more families find stable housing outside the shelter system.

“What they could do, with our help, is to find other ways of addressing their housing situation, short of the emergency assistance,” Ash said.

He continued: “The last thing that we want to see a family have to do is to go into a shelter or, worse yet, a hotel.”

The secretaries said many families who access the shelter system using the criteria the administration hopes to suspend would still qualify for emergency housing under other eligibility provisions, such as those for people dealing with domestic violence. And, they said, even after the changes were put in place, a family truly needing a place to stay would be provided with short-term shelter. They noted the Baker proposal also includes \$5 million for homeless prevention efforts.

“We do not want families living in cars or in South Station,” Sudders said. “[But] if there is a way to divert folks from going into the shelters and stabilizing them [in longer-term housing], we want to be able to do that.”

Philip Mangano, a longtime state and national advocate for the homeless, said that Massachusetts’ policies for combatting homelessness were not working in the years before Baker came into office. He pointed to federal data showing Massachusetts had the largest increase in the number of homeless people in families from 2013-14 of any state in the country, and said, so far, Baker has had a “very thoughtful approach” to the issue.

Hayes, of Homes for Families, said under the administration of Governor Deval Patrick, a Democrat, there were a lot of “drastic policy changes” that “made things seem chaotic for families.”

She praised the “steady” efforts on reducing homelessness under Baker, a Republican, and said the administration seemed to be building policies that are working — which is why, she said, she is so surprised by the push to tighten eligibility.

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