



EDITORIAL

Lifting a burden on the homeless



BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

Boston Mayor Marty Walsh and Jim Greene, director of the Emergency Shelter Commission for the city, talked to Danielle Doherty, 29, in Downtown Crossing during the annual homeless census in January.

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SOME FAMILIES in need of emergency shelter in Massachusetts must prove it by spending at least one night in a place not safe or fit for human habitation.

That's no joke. It's state policy. A [bill](#) filed by state Representative Marjorie Decker of Cambridge would change that, and deserves support.

Massachusetts can take pride in its progressive approach to addressing homelessness. It's the only state in the nation with a "right to shelter" law guaranteeing emergency housing for families that qualify. But because of high housing costs, homelessness is an insidious and growing problem. According to a recent report by The Boston Foundation, homelessness in Massachusetts has almost doubled over the past nine years, one of the largest increases in the country.

Under increased pressure to meet its legal obligation, the state has been making it harder for people to qualify for the Emergency Assistance family shelter program. Families with children have to meet minimum income guidelines and show that they are homeless for one of four reasons: domestic violence, natural disaster, no-fault eviction, or severe health and safety risks. If they don't fall into one of those four specific categories, they must show their need for shelter by proving their homelessness. To do so, families spend the night at a bus stop or train station or in a car or hospital emergency room. They take photos or ask officials to document their presence.

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This policy was first put in place during the administration of Governor Deval Patrick, a Democrat, and continues under Republican Governor Charlie Baker. At a recent legislative action day sponsored by the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, families that were forced to first stay in unsafe places and representatives from Boston Children's Hospital spoke out against it, saying it makes no sense to put children in an unsafe environment before they qualify for shelter.

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From July 1 to Dec. 31, 2016, 369 families were accepted into [Emergency Assistance](#) shelters after first staying in places not meant for human habitation. For all of fiscal 2016, a total of 628 families qualified in that manner.

Decker's bill would require the state to provide shelter to otherwise eligible families experiencing homelessness that are within 24 hours of having to sleep in a place not meant for human habitation. State officials warn that removing the requirement would “open the floodgates” and add millions more to emergency shelter costs. But there should be some better way to prevent fraud.

The need for shelter is clearly there. Baker is seeking \$21 million for a [supplemental appropriation](#) to the Emergency Assistance budget for the current fiscal year.

Families who qualify for that shelter shouldn't have to tough it out by spending the night on the streets to prove their desperate need for help from the state.

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