

# Massachusetts budget aims to ease eligibility for homeless shelters

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BOSTON — Massachusetts is on the verge of repealing a rule advocates say led to many homeless families spending a night in a car or emergency room before becoming eligible for shelter.

Families with children today can enter shelter in Massachusetts if they were a victim of domestic violence, were evicted or suffered a natural disaster. Or, for a family to qualify under a rule meant to prevent children from living in unsafe situations, they must have spent a night in a place "not meant for human habitation."

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Advocates for homeless people have been trying for years to repeal this rule, which was put in place under former Gov. Deval Patrick in 2012 and kept by Gov. Charlie Baker.

The fiscal 2020 state budget that was released from conference committee Sunday and approved by the Legislature Monday includes language to repeal the rule.



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“Government should not be in a place where you’re actively putting families in harm’s way,” said Rep. Marjorie Decker, D-Cambridge, who introduced legislation to repeal the rule. “That was what that rule did.”

However, officials with the Department of Housing and Community Development say the new language will simply codify existing practice, because the department today does not actually force anyone to stay in a place not meant for human habitation. Rather, the department will try to place in shelter anyone who does not have feasible alternative housing.

Samantha Kaufman, a spokeswoman for the Department of Housing and Community Development, declined to comment Monday afternoon, because the budget had not yet passed both the House and the Senate. “We look forward to reviewing the legislation once it reaches the governor’s desk,” Kaufman said.

The provision was implemented by Patrick in order to control shelter costs and ensure that families who enter shelter actually need it.

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Advocates for repealing the rule said it resulted in children sleeping for a night in cars, bus stations, campgrounds, emergency rooms or other places not meant for families to live. The rule also dissuaded some families from seeking emergency shelter, even if they were at imminent risk of homelessness.

“Its purpose was to have a chilling effect, and I think it worked,” Decker said.



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Since 2012, around 600 families a year have been placed in shelter after proving that they spent a

The coalition estimates that around 1,000 more families annually would become eligible for shelter immediately under the rule change, although many would have entered shelter anyway a day later. Turley estimated that the cost would be \$300,000 to \$500,000 a year.

Turley called the move “a really important step forward” to making Massachusetts live up to its claim that is “a right to shelter” state, where all homeless families with children are eligible for emergency shelter.

“In practice, it hasn’t been, because of the barriers such as this provision that have been in effect,” Turley said.

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A 2017 bill that would have changed the rule legislatively did not pass. This is the first time lawmakers got a rule change into the final version of the budget.

After the budget passes the Legislature, it will be up to Baker whether to veto the provision or sign it. It will become effective as soon as it is signed into law.



### Advocates hope to ease eligibility for Massachusetts emergency homeless shelters

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