

Policy shifts in how Mass. handles its homelessness crisis took effect this week. Advocates have mixed reactions.

By **Danny McDonald** Globe Staff, Updated December 12, 2024, 1:34 p.m.



Migrants left the Lexington Armory shelter one morning in August. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Changes to how Massachusetts [is handling its homelessness crisis took effect this week](#), and the shifts in policy were met with mixed reaction from advocates, some of whom pointedly asked whether the moves were efficient, humane, or even legal.

Last month, state officials said they are creating a new, two-track system for eligible homeless families seeking shelter. In a change that began on Tuesday, authorities are

allowing many families to stay for 30 business days in so-called temporary respite centers. The previous cap was five days, which critics lambasted as cruel.

While the change will give some families more time, some advocates said it's still not nearly enough. Kelly Turley, associate director for the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, said it's unrealistic to expect many families to be able to exit homelessness into safe, affordable housing in 30 business days.

“Artificial timelines for five days or 30 days — we're afraid they're going to set families up for failure,” she said this week.

Under the state's new approach, there is now a different track, separate from the respite centers, for families seeking shelter who are considered high-risk. Women who have late-term pregnancies or families that include people with intellectual or developmental disabilities will be allowed to stay for months under what state officials called a longer-term “bridge shelter” track.

Currently there are more than 7,000 families in the emergency assistance shelter system, according to state authorities. More than 6,800 are on the “bridge shelter” track, while 195 are on the rapid shelter track in the respite centers. On Wednesday, the state said it did not have enough data to determine how the policy changes affected turnover in the various shelter spaces. There are “bridge shelter” locations in 84 communities in the state, with the most units being in Boston, Lowell, and Worcester.

The changes come as state officials look to drastically slash the nearly \$1.1 billion the maxed-out shelter system is projected to cost this fiscal year. Last fiscal year, the state spent more than \$856 million on the emergency assistance shelter system. Last month, Governor Maura Healey announced she would seek to cap stays in emergency assistance shelters, which are different, more longer-term spaces than the temporary respite centers, to six months, down from nine months.

Healey said in a November statement that the state's family shelter system has in recent years grown to be increasingly unsustainable. The changes the state is making will reduce costs, phase out the use of hotels, and better meet the needs of families, she said.

"We've taken significant action to rein in its growth, and we've seen tangible results," Healey said. "The size of the system has remained stable for the past year, we no longer have families relying on Emergency Departments or the airport for shelter, and all shelter sites currently have a service provider instead of relying on the National Guard."

For months, the state has been buffeted by a migrant crisis, as people fled violent unrest throughout Latin America, which has contributed to a strained shelter system and put the state's unique right-to-shelter law to the test. The law has for 40 years required state officials to quickly provide shelter to homeless families.

Some advocates this week ripped the state's approach, saying Healey's administration is restricting access to the state's emergency shelter system. The policy changes, critics assert, would exclude most families from EA shelters, and instead offer the 30-day stays in the respite centers, which are located only in Eastern Massachusetts and include congregate sleeping quarters in barrack-style rooms.

"We know that in this housing market, six months may not be enough time to find safe housing, let alone 30 days," said Carolyn Chou of Homes for All Massachusetts, in a statement.

Some advocates have also questioned the legality of the changes and whether the moves would actually save taxpayers money, surmising that forcing families onto the street will ultimately increase costs borne by municipalities, health care providers, and nonprofits.

"These changes mean many eligible families will never be able to access an Emergency Assistance shelter placement," Liz Alfred of Greater Boston Legal Services said in a statement.

In response to criticism, a spokesperson for the state's Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities said the state's special commission on emergency housing assistance programs held multiple public listening sessions for shelter providers, community-based organizations, advocates, families in shelter, and others to inform the policy recommendations that were included in a report released last month from the commission.

[Pastor Dieufort Fleurissant](#) recommended the increase in the length of stay at the respite centers while serving on the state's special commission. The idea was to give families more time to be connected to housing, language, and job services, he said this week. He framed the issue as a moral and humanitarian one.

"I consider it quite immoral to push families on the streets because those families are fleeing dangers," said Fleurissant, a pillar of the local Haitian American community who is widely known as "Pastor Keke." "We cannot expose them to bad conditions — we should definitely offer them opportunities to be safe and to start again with their lives."

Andrea Park, a staff attorney at the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, said she fears that "we're going to see more children on the sidewalk."

"We need to be doing everything we can to protect the [emergency assistance] shelter system; we should be thinking about how to make it more efficient and expansive," she said over the phone this week. "Instead of timelines, what about goals?"

She said the changes are confusing to advocates, housing providers, and families seeking shelter.

"People are scrambling to keep up with what the changes mean," she said.

Matt Stout of Globe staff contributed to this report.

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