

FAQs – Frequently Asked Questions

October 16, 2023

REACHING CAPACITY

What does it mean to say we are “reaching capacity”?

The Commonwealth will continue to find and fund shelter for 7500 homeless families, including hotel and motel units, but we do not anticipate being able to continue to expand the number of shelter units beyond that point.

Is this the same as saying the Administration is placing a cap on family shelter capacity?

The cost of rapidly expanding the shelter system has risen to an unsustainable rate and we do not have the shelter units, service providers, or funding to meet the demand.

Continued expansion at current rates will push the cost far beyond what can be paid for with our current appropriation and the supplemental appropriation already requested.

Furthermore, the state’s shelter provider partners are stretched beyond their capacity. We are finding it harder and harder to add new units to our shelter portfolio and to ensure that families are safe in shelter and have access to basic necessities, such as food, formula, and diapers.

The hard reality is that we do not have the funding, service providers, or other resources needed to safely shelter more than 7500 unhoused families in Massachusetts.

When will capacity be reached?

We will reach our family shelter capacity at approximately 7,500 families. We expect to reach this number of families by the end of the month.

Why 7500 families? Why the end of the month?

Even allowing for expansion to 7,500 families will mean that the EA system will have run out of funding (taking into account both the existing FY24 budget and the supplemental budget pending before the Legislature). Additionally, we do not think we can safely expand beyond this point due to a lack of shelter units and service provider availability.

The end of the month represents the date when we expect to have this number of families in shelter and the earliest date that the changes we are outlining can be implemented.

How long will this capacity limit stay in effect?

Our hope is to receive federal assistance that will allow us to continue to adjust this strategy.

Will placements continue to be made in my community?

Yes, as families transition out of emergency shelter into permanent housing, eligible families may be placed in vacated shelter units. Additionally, as hotel units expire, we may need to place families in new communities at new supplemental shelter sites.

HOTELS & SUPPLEMENTAL SHELTER SITES

What does this mean for the hotels being used for shelter in my community?

We will continue to utilize hotels for emergency shelter and may need to add new hotels to our portfolio as temporary hotel placements expire.

What does this mean for the National Guard? The Regional Response Teams?

This capacity announcement does not affect the current operation of Supplemental Shelter hotels.

Does this mean the state will no longer be expanding shelter into hotels?

The state will no longer expand our shelter portfolio; however, we will continue to book and contract with new hotels as hotel reservations expire.

How long can my community expect to continue hosting a hotel shelter?

We do not have a definitive timeline to offer at this time.

SCHOOLS

What resources will be made available for homeless school-aged children who are not immediately placed in shelter?

DESE will continue to provide the \$104/student/day reimbursement to municipalities for students who entered the school system after the previous year's October 1 report until funding appropriated for this purpose is expended. The supplemental budget filed by the Governor in September includes funding for school district reimbursements.

In addition, DESE commits to reimbursing school districts incurring significantly higher-than-usual homeless student transportation costs with reimbursement as soon as their End of Year Reports are submitted without awaiting the completion of an audit, as is DESE's typical practice.

The Administration is considering additional programs that could be implemented to further support municipalities.

Does reaching capacity impact school enrollment?

No, under federal McKinney-Vento law, school districts are required to enroll students who are experiencing homelessness. Homelessness is defined in federal McKinney-Vento law as lacking a “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” Therefore, school districts should continue their normal process for enrolling students experiencing homelessness.

GENERAL QUESTIONS

Do eligibility requirements for family shelter change due to the system reaching capacity?

Eligibility requirements are not being changed, but we will implement a prioritization framework for placement to ensure families at greatest health and safety risk are prioritized for shelter resources.

When we reach the capacity limit will eligible families no longer be guaranteed shelter?

Our goal remains to provide shelter for all eligible families. We are investing in policies, programs, and resources to help families exit shelter so that eligible families will continue to be able to access shelter as others exit the system.

Families who have been deemed eligible but unable to use diversion resources to transition into housing will be screened for prioritization based on medical vulnerability and risk to safety. Families will be placed and prioritized on the waitlist based on these criteria.

We also will focus on ensuring that families are aware of and can access alternatives to shelter, including the HomeBASE benefit, to help stabilize their housing situation.

How will the family shelter waitlist work? The state already has an immense waitlist for public housing, how will this one be better managed?

Unlike state-aided public housing (which is administered by more than 230 different housing authorities), EOHLC will maintain a single statewide list of families waiting for shelter availability.

Will certain families be prioritized (i.e., victims of domestic violence, families with unique health needs, pregnant individuals, etc.)?

The Administration is working in partnership with the Department of Public Health to identify specific, objective factors that would entitle a family to placement on a priority basis based on

medical vulnerability and risk to immediate safety. Families actively fleeing domestic violence would also receive priority.

Is this happening because of the influx of migrants?

The high cost and limited availability of housing, and an influx of new arrivals to the state fleeing violence and poverty in their home countries, have both led to an increased need for emergency family shelter.

Our broken federal immigration system is a contributing factor, particularly as migrants who are eligible to work are not able to because of bureaucratic delays with getting their work authorizations.

Does this mean that the Administration is ending “Right to Shelter”?

No. The law is still in effect, and we will continue to place eligible families in shelter as units become available.

Current appropriations and the proposed supplemental budget will allow the Administration to continue providing shelter services, however this funding cannot accommodate further expansion.

The Administration continues to request additional support and resources from the Federal Government.

Can the Administration do this without the Legislature?

Both MGL c. 23B Section 30 and the EA line item (7004-0101) emphasize that the EA program is subject to appropriation.

Under state finance law, state agencies are not allowed to incur costs when there is no currently identified or reasonably likely source of payment.

What are the alternatives to family shelter?

EOHLC administers the HomeBASE program, which can provide eligible homeless families with help paying first/last month’s rent and security deposits, moving expenses, stipends to help with ongoing housing costs, and other costs that can help families stabilize an existing housing situation or stably rehouse.

EOHLC is also partnering with DTA and MassHealth to be able to rapidly connect families with available benefits.

The Administration is calling on faith-based organizations and other non-government organizations to help support homeless families.

EXIT STRATEGY

How does the Administration intend on expediting exiting from the system?

The Administration is working with a wide range of stakeholders, including our non-profit shelter provider partners that work most closely with EA families, to expand and improve programs that can help families stabilize existing housing situations or rapidly re-house.

Efforts are underway to support exits for families who have been in shelter the longest, with additional plans for policy change and innovation over the coming months.

Can you tell us more about the state's work training benefits program?

This is under development, and we will have more to share at a later time.

Why has the state placed a time-limit on family's length of stay in shelter?

Shelter is designed to help families transition out of homelessness, not to serve as permanent housing. Ultimately, the family shelter system will only be able to serve the needs of newly homeless families if families already in shelter exit to permanent housing.

The Administration is committed to working with providers, families, other Commonwealth agencies and other stakeholders to help ensure that families are able to resolve their homelessness and move out of shelter into safe, stable housing situations.

FUNDING

The Supp Budget request you filed in September was based on caseloads at that time. Even when this capacity is reached, the state's expenses exceed what was included in that request. How are you planning to fund shelter for 7,500 families?

The Administration has been working with Legislative leadership to share information on caseload growth and incurred and expected costs. The Secretary of Administration and Finance will be talking to the Chairs of Ways and Means over the coming weeks about funding solutions. We will work together to determine if more resources are needed and if so, how to unlock them after October 31 when we have an updated understanding of caseload levels and associated costs.