

HOUSE No. 4284



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GOVERNOR

KIMBERLEY DRISCOLL
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

January 24, 2024

To the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives,

Over the past year, the Emergency Assistance program in Massachusetts expanded at an extraordinary rate to meet rising demand, reaching the program’s capacity limit of 7,500 families in November 2023.

The Fiscal Year 2024 appropriation for the Emergency Assistance program in the General Appropriations Act included \$325 million of funding to support only 4,100 families. In September 2023, our Administration requested additional appropriations for the Emergency Assistance program and related support, reflecting the then-current caseload of approximately 6,400 families. The Legislature recently approved this supplemental funding, providing a critical infusion of resources to keep the system operating for the next several months. With the program operating at its capacity of 7,500 families, however, the Emergency Assistance program remains in a deficiency of \$224 million in the current fiscal year.

The state of emergency in our shelter system requires resources to ensure that families are safe and supported in communities, schools, and spaces that are resourced appropriately to assist them.

It also requires a multi-faceted set of policies that include education, workforce training, and affordable housing programs to enable families to leave shelter and move on to stable housing. In partnership with the Department of Homeland Security and multiple state agencies, our Administration successfully ran two weeks of work authorization clinics for migrants in Emergency Assistance and we remain focused on providing job training and pathways for parents. But finding and affording housing remains extremely challenging for far too many in Massachusetts. That is why this legislation also puts a down payment on additional housing

production for the types of affordable options that are all too scarce in some of our communities, with up to \$150 million dedicated to housing production and preservation.

At the same time, we need to support our partners - the local communities - that have stepped up to welcome newly arriving families and neighbors who need a hand. In particular, we must assist the schools and school districts that play a key role in helping children whose families are experiencing homelessness.

While we hope that these investments and policies will lead to a decrease in the number of families seeking shelter, the current average length of stay for families in the system exceeds one year. That means that even with the system's capacity level established, and significant efforts underway to advance solutions, deficiency needs for EA are a two fiscal year problem, requiring a solution that spans FY24 and FY25. Thankfully, the state has the resources available in Transitional Escrow, comprised of savings from prior years' budget surpluses, to put a plan in place that will address the funding needs in FY24 and most of FY25 without requiring offsetting budget cuts to other programs.

Therefore, I am proposing that the Legislature appropriate \$873 million into an Emergency Housing and Community Trust Fund for immediate and anticipated needs of the various agencies that each have a unique role in responding to heightened demand in our Emergency Assistance system and moving us toward a safe, supportive, and positive pathway to better futures for our unhoused families.

Funding from this proposal will:

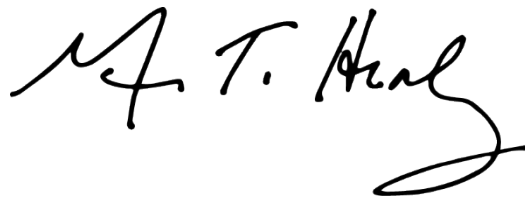
- Invest in housing production to spur development of the types of affordable units that will provide stable, permanent housing opportunities for families outside the shelter system;
- Cover the costs of shelter for the Emergency Assistance program capacity caseload of 7,500 families through the end of Fiscal Year 2024 and most of Fiscal Year 2025;
- Provide for the necessary services and supports for those 7,500 families in order to safely address their basic needs;
- Cover the costs of temporary emergency shelters, Family Welcome Centers, and clinical assessment and intake services, and other supportive programs;
- Assist local school districts with emergency aid for students whose families are experiencing homelessness;
- Assist cities and towns with the actual costs and impacts of welcoming unhoused families and family shelter sites into their communities;

- Launch new programs targeting the barriers to stable housing and the factors causing family shelter stays to be historically long, including efforts toward workforce skills, work authorizations, and English language instruction for employment; and
- Provide health care and specialized immigration and refugee-focused case management to families who need them.

Critically, the bill also includes provisions to allow for the efficient use of available resources by authorizing the transfer of funds between related programs, which will allow appropriated shelter funding to be utilized where it is most needed across the system to address the current extraordinary demand. This creates flexibility in how we address costs in FY25 so that if circumstances change, for example an infusion of federal support or broader work authorizations, resources can be redirected from reacting to the current situation to investing in housing production and preservation to make affordable, stable housing options available to more families.

I urge you to enact this legislation in the weeks ahead to ensure continued safe shelter and services for families in our shelter system, to support our cities and towns who are welcoming unhoused families into their communities, and to expand pathways to work and opportunities to exit the EA system for permanent, stable housing.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "M. T. Healey". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Maura T. Healey,
Governor