

BRIDGING DIVIDES

Spotlight on Massachusetts and the Shelter Crisis

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As we head into the shortest and coldest days of the year, the news around families and homelessness in Massachusetts is more troubling than ever. At the same time that "[the Americans most at risk of eviction are babies and toddlers](#)," the Massachusetts Governor made a controversial decision this fall to limit the rights of homeless families seeking emergency shelter. Some point to rising costs related to the influx of immigrants to the Bay State as a rationale for the cap, an argument which stuns me by being both xenophobic and factually incorrect at the same time.

The cap on shelter capacity was implemented with no clear plan for where families are supposed to go, and the stories about who is stepping up are both alarming and heartwarming. It shouldn't be the case that the General Manager of the MA transportation system offered up [converted conference rooms](#) in an office building for families on shelter waitlists (and thankfully this temporary situation just ended). Organizations like the YMCA and Catholic Charities are cobbling together solutions. The supplemental budget that was passed by the MA Legislature last week will fund stopgap measures. But these efforts are far from the coordinated response that is needed for what is unquestionably a humanitarian crisis.

Before this fall, Massachusetts had long heralded its status as one of the only states with a right to shelter, although in reality that "right" was honored more in the breach over the years. The Boston Globe recently [reported](#) that only 35% of income eligible families who applied for emergency shelter in 2022 were actually placed in shelter. The application process is daunting, and requires a stack of documentation that very few people on the edge of homelessness have on hand. And the income limits are so "[ridiculously low](#)" that many families in unstable housing who are just over that income threshold can't even apply. So even if somehow the cap on shelter occupants is lifted tomorrow, Massachusetts still has much work to do to protect our most vulnerable residents. We will need not only more expansive shelter policies, but also strategies to tackle the behemoths of rising rental costs, slow affordable housing development, and legacy impacts of decades of explicitly racist housing policies.

There is a promising new proposal that could be one piece of a more coordinated solution: MassHealth recently requested a waiver to use Medicaid dollars to cover six months of temporary housing assistance for pregnant members and families eligible for the state's EA shelter program. A few weeks ago, MLPB's Law & Policy Director Jeannine Casselman submitted comments to Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) applauding this proposed expansion: "MassHealth's 1115 waiver request would serve to demonstrate for the whole nation how shelter and housing services backed by health dollars can improve the health of housing insecure families." As winter arrives, we urge CMS to approve this proposal, and this new funding stream for emergency housing literally cannot come fast enough.