

# **Report of the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs**

November 19, 2024

## Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	1
Commission Overview .....	3
Commission Members .....	3
History of the EA Program and Current Status .....	5
Timeline and Key Milestones .....	8
Present Status of EA System .....	17
Fiscal Overview .....	19
Stakeholder Feedback .....	22
Lessons Learned .....	23
EA Program Findings and Recommendations .....	26
1. Ensure the EA Shelter System is Fiscally Sustainable .....	26
2. Ensure the EA Shelter System is Operationally Sustainable .....	27
3. Emphasize Prevention, Diversion, and Exit Tools .....	28
4. Limit Reliance on Hotels and Motels as EA Shelter .....	29
5. Maintain Policies that Set Clear Expectations and Outcomes .....	30
6. Move Toward a Needs-Based Model, Away From a One-Size-Fits-All Approach .....	31
7. Continue and Improve Regional EA Shelter System Management .....	32
8. Strengthen Affordable Housing Access Across Massachusetts .....	32
9. Improve Data Collection, Collaboration, and Analysis .....	33
10. Convene and Consult with Experts and Stakeholders .....	33
Conclusion .....	34
Appendix A: Families in the EA System .....	35
Appendix B: List of Written Testimony Received from Organizations .....	37
Appendix C: Additional Recommendations from Individual Commission Members .....	38

## Executive Summary

The Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs (Commission), established by Section 23 of Ch. 88 of the Acts 2024 and chaired by Lt. Governor Driscoll, studied and made recommendations on “(i) the sustainability, efficiency and effectiveness of the emergency housing assistance program; (ii) how to best support and ensure the long-term sufficiency of those seeking shelter; and (iii) creating a regional based response to support families in need of shelter.”

The Commission has convened five meetings to better understand the surge in emergency assistance (“EA”) family shelter caseload, the fiscal and operational constraints on the EA shelter program, and how to improve the EA shelter program to better serve families. The Commission analyzed how shelter caseload and system costs have increased to unsustainable levels since 2022, and what challenges the emergency shelter system faced prior to the surge in caseload. It also discussed how families use the EA shelter system, including how long families have historically stayed in shelter, and the services they have access to while in shelter.

The Commission reviewed the Healey-Driscoll Administration’s response to an extraordinary increase in demand for EA shelter, and the new policies that have been put in place to respond to increased demand and move toward a system that provides services adjusted for family needs and risks. The Commission discussed the tools that exist for families to exit or divert from shelter into sustainable housing and access employment resources.

The Commission has aligned on high-level principles to shape the future of this program.

- Family homelessness should be rare, brief, and nonrecurring.
- The pathways for families in the EA shelter system should not be one-size-fits-all.
- The EA shelter system should be operationally and fiscally sustainable.

The Commission offers recommendations to shift toward these principles:

1. Ensure the EA Shelter System is Fiscally Sustainable
2. Ensure the EA Shelter System is Operationally Sustainable
3. Focus on Prevention, Diversion, and Exit Tools
4. Limit Reliance on Hotels and Motels as EA Shelter
5. Maintain Policies that Set Clear Expectations and Outcomes
6. Move Toward a Needs-Based Model, Away From a One-Size-Fits-All Approach
7. Continue and Improve Regional EA Shelter System Management
8. Strengthen Affordable Housing Access Across Massachusetts

## Report of the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs

9. Improve Data Collection, Collaboration, and Analysis
10. Convene and Consult with Experts and Stakeholders

## Commission Overview

In response to the surge in Emergency Assistance (EA) family shelter system caseload, Section 23 of Chapter 88 of the Acts 2024 established the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs (the Commission), mandated to “study and make recommendations on: (i) the sustainability, efficiency and effectiveness of the emergency housing assistance program; (ii) how to best support and ensure the long-term sufficiency of those seeking shelter; and (iii) creating a regional based response to support families in need of shelter.”<sup>1</sup>

In Commission meetings, members sought to understand the current fiscal and operational state of the EA family shelter program and how families are navigating this system. Meetings covered topics ranging from the tools families use to exit shelter to what kinds of shelter sites serve families best. The Commission has agreed on a new vision for the EA family shelter program focused on making family homelessness rare, brief, and nonrecurring, designed to be operationally and fiscally sustainable, and moving away from a one-size-fits-all model for families.

The Commission is chaired by Lieutenant Governor Kimberley Driscoll and includes representatives of relevant state departments, bipartisan representation from both the Senate and House of Representatives, and representatives from shelter providers and advocacy groups.

## Commission Members

- \*Lieutenant Governor Kimberley Driscoll, Commission Chair
- \*Secretary Edward Augustus, Secretary of Housing and Livable Communities
- \*Secretary Kate Walsh, Secretary of Health and Human Services
- \*Secretary Matthew Gorzkowicz, Secretary of Administration and Finance
- \*Cristina Aguilera Sandoval, Executive Director, Office for Immigrants and Refugees
- \*Senator Lydia Edwards, Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Housing
- †Representative James Arciero, House Chair, Joint Committee on Housing
- \*Senator Robyn Kennedy, Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities
- †Representative Jay Livingstone, House Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities

---

<sup>1</sup> [Session Law - Acts of 2024 Chapter 88](#)

## Report of the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs

- \*Representative Paul Frost, Second Assistant Minority Leader
- \*Senator Ryan Fattman, Assistant Minority Leader
- \*Leah Bradley, Chief Executive Officer, Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance
- \*Lyndia Downie, President & Executive Director, Pine Street Inn
- \*Pastor Dieufort Fleurissant, President & Executive Director, True Alliance Center

\* Voted to approve the report at the Commission’s November 19, 2024 meeting. (Sec. Gorzkowicz was represented at the November 19, 2024 meeting by his designee, Catia Sharp, Chief of Social Innovation, Executive Office for Administration and Finance.)

† Abstained from voting on the report at the Commission’s November 19, 2024 meeting.

Starting in July 2024, the Commission convened five meetings. The full minutes and slides from these meetings can be accessed online on the Mass.gov Emergency Housing Assistance [webpage](#).<sup>2</sup> Individual commissioners also conducted six listening sessions with external stakeholders to inform the content and recommendations of this report. Overviews of topics covered in these listening sessions are covered in a later section.

---

<sup>2</sup> [Emergency Housing Assistance | Mass.gov](#)

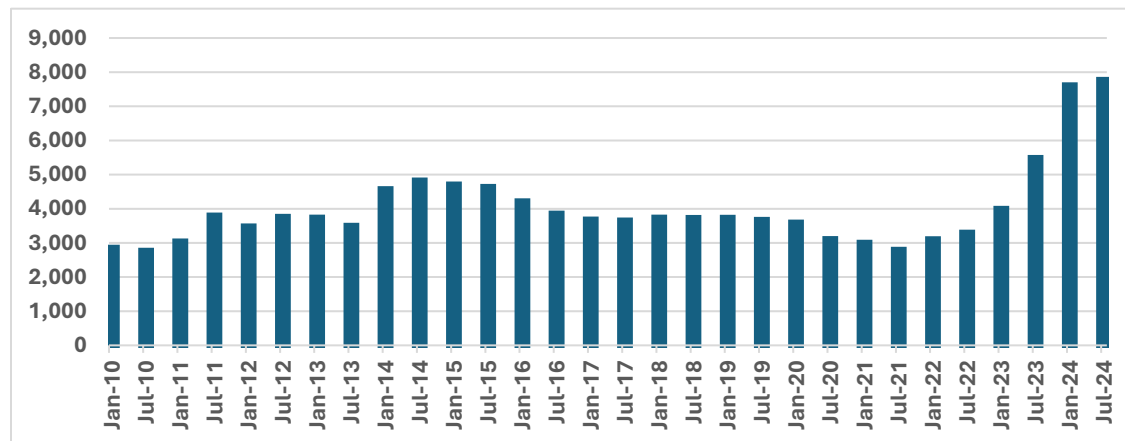
## History of the EA Program and Current Status

With the 1983 passage of Section 30 of Chapter 23B, Massachusetts created a one-of-a-kind family shelter system that provides temporary emergency shelter for families with children and pregnant individuals who are experiencing homelessness. The statute creating the program has been amended several times, and the modern iteration of this shelter system is the Emergency Assistance (EA) program which has contributed to one of the lowest rates of unsheltered family homelessness in the country.

Since establishment, family shelter caseload levels have risen and fallen in response to external economic and immigration factors and affordable housing availability. Historically, as caseload has increased, hotels and motels have been used to emergently scale up the EA shelter system and provide short-term shelter when demand exceeds the supply of permanent shelter units. Prior to the extraordinary demand in the last two years, the state's EA shelter caseload peaked in 2014 at 4,600 families, with 1,500 families in temporary shelter units at hotels and motels. In response to high EA shelter demand, the state developed new diversion and exit tools such as the HomeBASE program, which provides funds and case management to families who find permanent housing as an alternative to EA shelter. EA shelter caseload reached 2,800 families in 2020 after an effort by the state to reduce reliance on hotels and motels. In part, the reduced reliance on temporary hotel and motel shelter units was accomplished by adding scattered shelter sites, which are individual apartments rented from landlords to be used as shelter. These units look and feel more like permanent housing than other types of shelter units. During the COVID-19 pandemic, turnover in the apartment rental market and EA shelter system slowed significantly. While caseload remained between 3,000 and 3,500 families (see Figure 1), the number of families exiting shelter declined significantly causing the average length of time families spent in shelter to increase from an average of 378 days in 2018, to over 450 days in 2021. Additionally, housing affordability and low vacancy rates exacerbate the challenges families face to exit shelter.

Since 2017, the state has substantially increased its investment in the EA shelter program, which has helped address an increase in the need for shelter due to rising housing costs and, in more recent years, the influx of new immigrants who qualify for EA. However, increased investment has historically not been paired with improvements or efficiencies that can help the system serve more families with less units, and therefore less expense. As a result, budget appropriations for EA shelter have risen from \$155 million in Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 to \$501 million in FY 2025.

**Figure 1. Historical EA Shelter Caseload Typically Remains Below 4,000: 2010-2024**

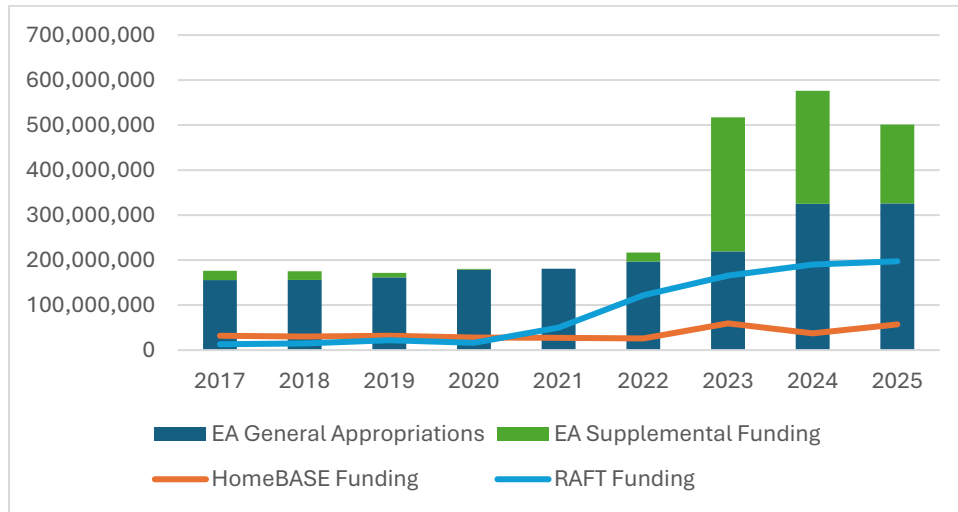


The state has significantly increased funding for housing stabilization programs like HomeBASE since the start of the most recent surge in demand, from \$32 million in FY 2017 to \$57 million in FY 2025, and Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT), from \$13 million in FY 2017 to \$197 million in FY 2025. These programs are designed to prevent families from experiencing homelessness or to exit and divert families from shelter in order to ensure that families’ stays in shelter are brief, rare, and non-recurring. These programs were previously under the Department of Housing and Community Development and are overseen today by the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC).<sup>3</sup> For a full overview of funding levels since 2017, see Figure 2.

<sup>3</sup> The Healey-Driscoll Administration elevated housing and homelessness by creating a new Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities in June of 2023.



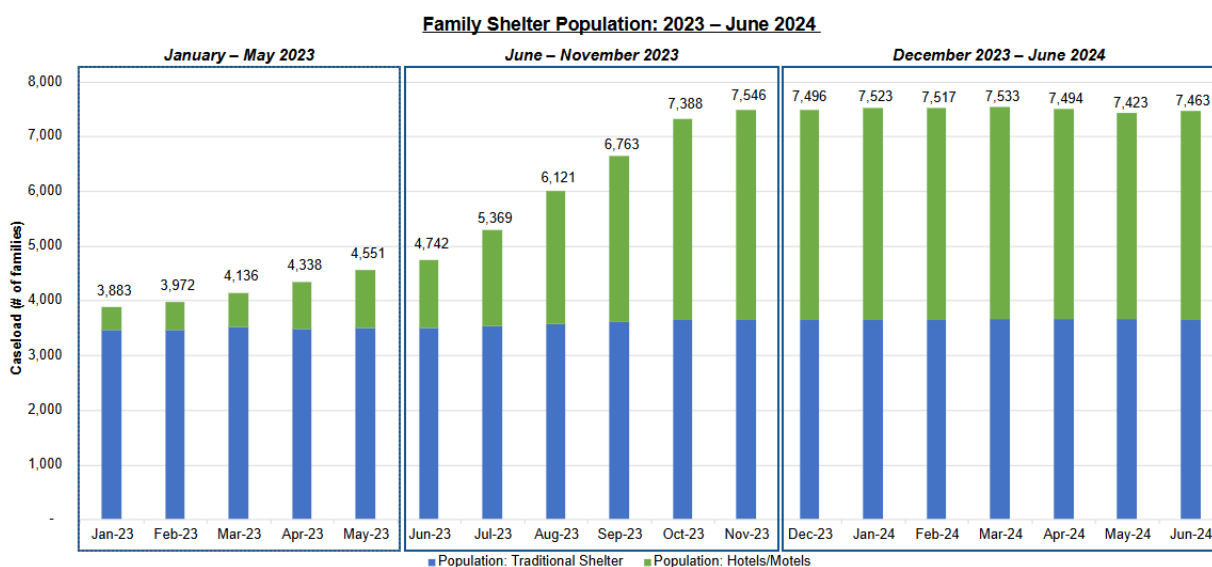
**Figure 2. Increased Investment in EA Shelter, HomeBASE, and RAFT Since FY 2017**



## Timeline and Key Milestones

In 2022, the number of families eligible for and requesting EA shelter began to rapidly increase due to federal policies on immigration and work authorization, a shortage of affordable housing related to inadequate production of homes over the last decade in Massachusetts, and the end of COVID-era food and housing security programs. By March 2023, the EA shelter caseload surpassed the approximately 3,500 families that the EA shelter program has historically served and was continuing to experience extraordinary levels of new daily demand (68 families new per day seeking access to EA shelter, up from 25 families per day a year prior) – see Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Extraordinary Rise in EA Shelter Caseload: January 2023 – June 2024**



### Incident Command: An All-of-Government Approach (May 2023)

In May 2023, the Healey-Driscoll Administration implemented an Incident Command Structure to coordinate services and address the needs of the shelter population among the Governor’s Office, Executive Office of Administration and Finance (EOAF), the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC), the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD), the Executive Office of Education (EOE), the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security (EOPSS), the Executive Office of Veterans’ Services (EOVS), the Office for Refugees and Immigrants (ORI), and many other partner agencies.

### **Family Welcome Centers (summer 2023)**

In the summer of 2023, a new Family Welcome Center (FWC) program was created, and sites in Allston and Quincy opened in June and July respectively, to assist families seeking housing assistance and coordinate

#### **Family Welcome Centers (FWC)**

FWCs serve as a central entry point to connect families with services including but not limited to EA shelter intake; basic needs provisions; employment authorization legal assistance; public benefits enrollment; vaccinations and health screenings; reticketing; and referrals to ESOL, legal assistance, mental health and healthcare services.

services through a family-centric approach at the front door. The FWCs provide assistance with meeting basic needs and making referrals to a wide range of resources and have co-located services for health assessments and immunizations through the Department of Public Health (DPH), benefit applications assistance through the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), and legal assistance in applying for work authorizations through the Lawyer for a Day program among others.

### **Rapid Expansion: Supplemental Shelter Sites (July 2023)**

In July 2023, to continue to meet rapidly expanding EA shelter demand of 68 families per day, EA shelter expanded into hotels and motels at such a rapid pace that EOHLC was unable to coordinate and scale EA shelter provider contracts to provide basic needs support and case management at many new hotel and motel sites as is a standard component of the EA shelter model. These sites were referred to as “supplemental shelters,” and despite the Healey-Driscoll Administration’s preference to have EA shelter providers at all sites, supplemental shelters were initially supported by limited state staff. On September 5, 2023, National Guard members were deployed by the Healey-Driscoll Administration to provide additional on-site support at these supplemental shelter sites until EA shelter providers could adequately staff up and contract to oversee these sites. Additionally, the Administration launched the Immigration Assistance Services (IAS) program led by the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition (MIRA) in staffed shelters to assist EA shelter residents with their case management and work authorization applications.

### **State of Emergency (August 2023)**

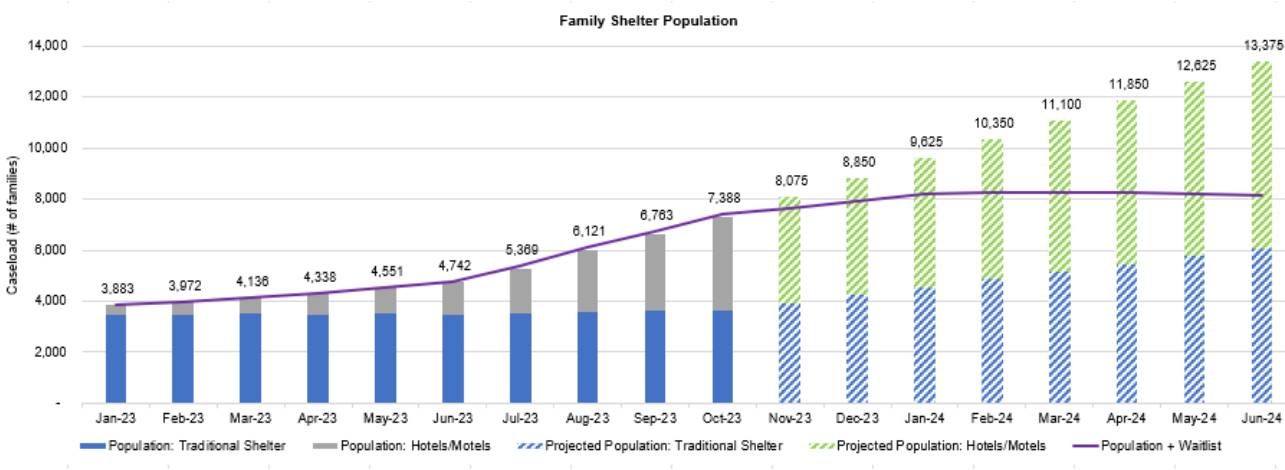
By August 2023, the extraordinary demand for EA shelter had expanded the program caseload to 5,500 families; the system was on a trajectory to hit a caseload of 13,000 families by summer of 2024 as shown in Figure 4. Given the operational constraints of managing this number of families within a system already grappling with National Guard-

staffed supplemental shelter sites, in response, Governor Healey declared a state of emergency on August 8, 2023.<sup>4</sup> The emergency declaration<sup>5</sup> directed members of the Administration to continue to utilize and operationalize all means to secure housing, shelter, and health and human services; requested federal support; and called on local governments and charities to continue supporting families in need. The month following the emergency declaration, the Healey-Driscoll Administration filed a supplemental budget request for \$250 million to continue to operate the system.

### EA Shelter Operational Capacity

The EA family shelter system was determined to no longer be able to meet all current and projected demand due to a lack of additional space after expanding into 4,000 units in hotels and motels, a lack of additional emergency service provider capacity supplemented by National Guard staff, and a lack of sufficient funding to support further expansion. The maximum capacity of the EA shelter system was determined to be 7,500 families.

**Figure 4. Actual & Projected Rise in EA Shelter Caseload at Time of Declaration**



### Legal Services Contracts (September 2023)

In September 2023, the Administration launched additional legal services through a variety of providers, including Resettlement Agencies, to focus on assisting immigrants in the EA shelter system seeking work authorization. EA shelter is available to families who are lawfully present in the United States, but some pathways require a separate application to

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mass.gov/news/governor-healey-declares-state-of-emergency-calls-for-support-for-newly-arriving-migrant-families>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mass.gov/doc/declaration-emergency-assistance-family-shelter-1/download>

the federal government for authorization to work. Resettlement Agencies also helped those who obtained work authorization to find work and permanent housing to exit shelter.

### **EA Shelter System Reaches Capacity (November 2023)**

After several months of expanding the emergency shelter system at an unsustainable rate and without additional financial resources or operational capacity to continue expansion, on October 16, 2023, the Healey-Driscoll Administration announced that the state's shelter system would soon reach its maximum capacity of 7,500 families, representing approximately 24,000 individuals. A waitlist was established for families seeking shelter once the maximum capacity was reached. Families placed on the waitlist received information about other resources available throughout the state, were assessed for needs and risks, and were referred to diversion services to help find stable housing as an alternative to shelter. The Healey-Driscoll Administration also announced a new prioritization system to assess families with high clinical and safety risk to be prioritized for placement in EA shelter.<sup>6</sup> Criteria were developed in consultation with experts from DTA, DPH, and DCF and expanded from clinical and safety risk to other criteria over time. High risk families to be prioritized on the waitlist include families with significant medical needs, families determined to be at imminent risk of harm due to domestic violence, and those with a family member with a

#### **EA Prioritization Framework**

At EA shelter intake sites, HLC staff support families in applying for EA shelter and determine their eligibility. As part of the EA shelter application, HLC staff provide a pre-screen for clinical risk. If a family meets clinical risk prioritization criteria, is at imminent risk of domestic violence, is homeless because they were evicted due to no fault of their own, has at least one member who is a veteran, or is exiting a DCF Young Parent Living Program, they are determined high risk or need and prioritized for placement in EA shelter. Families who pre-screen for specific clinical risks are referred for a full Clinical and Safety Risk Assessment; families can request an in-person or virtual assessment. Families requesting in-person assessment are referred to Clinical and Safety Risk Assessment sites where they can remain until placed in EA shelter, pending availability

Once determined eligible, families are placed on a contact list and offered EA shelter, when available, in order of their prioritization. Families on the contact list can also access diversion services to get assistance to rehouse instead of going to shelter if they are able.

---

<sup>6</sup> EOHLC issued guidance implementing a prioritization framework for families seeking emergency shelter on October 31, 2023. The guidance was later updated on August 1, 2024 and can be found here: <https://www.mass.gov/doc/ea-guidance-on-contact-list-and-prioritization-procedures/download>

high-risk pregnancy or an infant child. In November 2023, the number of families in EA shelter reached capacity and the prioritization system went into effect.

This change represents a shift toward a shelter model that engages in risk reduction and rapid rehousing, attempting to serve as many families as possible more efficiently. The Administration paired the new prioritization framework with a focus on additional services that could help families seeking access to EA shelter by diverting families from shelter and increasing exits to allow the shelter system to serve as many families as possible. To do so, the Administration expanded programs like HomeBASE, rapid rehousing and rental

### **Clinical Safety and Risk Assessment Sites (CSR)**

At CSR sites, families who pre-screen as meeting clinical risk criteria complete a full CSR Assessment with a licensed medical professional. All families who meet prioritization criteria can stay at a CSR site, pending availability. At these sites, families receive clinical supports, connections to care, and case management services.

assistance incentives, and incentives for landlords to assist vulnerable families in need of permanent housing. Finally, the state also designated overflow sites to provide temporary shelter for EA-eligible families awaiting placement in EA shelter and Clinical and Safety Risk Assessment (CSR) sites for families identified for further health and safety assessment. The Administration also provided funding to the United Way of Massachusetts Bay to launch a Safety-Net Shelter program to provide shelter and supports to EA-eligible families on the waitlist through community-based partnerships throughout the Commonwealth.

### **Overflow Site Expansion (November 2023)**

Faced with more demand for shelter than the system could provide, the Healey-Driscoll Administration made it a priority to nonetheless offer assistance to families in need. Starting in November, the Healey-Driscoll Administration operationalized a system of state-run overflow sites where providers were able to offer families awaiting EA shelter a place to sleep and case management services. The Administration launched the first, temporary overflow site at the

### **Overflow Sites**

Overflow sites are temporary sheltering locations established by EOHHS outside of the EA shelter system to help manage unsheltered families in excess of the EA shelter maximum capacity of 7,500. The physical set up of these sites differs from EA shelter in that some overflow sites do not afford families individual rooms. These locations are intended to be temporary and only available while demand exceeds the maximum EA shelter capacity.

## Report of the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs

Massachusetts Department of Transportation building in Boston in November 2023 with capacity for approximately 20 families (69 individuals) and closed the site in December 2024. The state then launched overflow sites as follows: at the Cambridge Registry of Deeds with capacity for 60 families (200 individuals) on December 23, 2023; at the Melnea A. Cass Recreational Complex in Roxbury with capacity for 105 families (350 individuals) from February to May 2024; at the former Quigley Hospital Building at the Chelsea Soldiers Home with capacity for 90 families (300 individuals) in April 2024; at the National Guard Armory in Lexington with capacity for 50 families (175 individuals) in May 2024; and at the decommissioned Bay State Correctional Center in Norfolk with a capacity of 140 families in June 2024.

The focus on establishing larger-scale overflow sites in the Greater Boston region was primarily driven by the concentration of immigrants entering the Commonwealth through ports of entry in Boston, which contributed to approximately 70% of families on the waitlist being located in the Greater Boston area. Services at overflow sites prioritize the health and safety of families as well as efforts to rapidly divert families from the EA shelter system through efforts to rehouse families.<sup>7</sup>

### **Work Authorization Clinics (November 2023)**

During the weeks of November 13, 2023 and November 27, 2023, in partnership with the Department of Homeland Security, the state held Work Authorization Clinics to significantly expedite the number of work authorization applications for immigrants in EA shelter. This followed a [letter](#) sent by Governor Healey to Secretary Mayorkas on August 8, 2023 requesting assistance and specifically asking for help removing barriers to receiving work authorization. The state organized appointments and provided transportation from shelter sites to the clinic. Over 3,000 Employment Authorization Document (EAD) applications were filed, and the state's partnership with USCIS allowed for immigrants to receive work authorization cards in 5 to 6 weeks, significantly reduced from the previously typical 5 to 6 months. Work authorization is a critical step toward employment and self-sufficient rehousing placement for families seeking access to EA shelter.

### **Lawyer for the Day Program (January 2024)**

In January of 2024, ORI launched a Lawyer for the Day program at Quincy FWC to provide legal services to support work authorization for families seeking entry to EA shelter at the

---

<sup>7</sup> The Healey-Driscoll Administration submitted the following report to the Massachusetts Legislature on June 17, 2024, detailing the Administration's efforts to operationalize overflow sites, including a timeline and funds expended to these sites:

[https://malegislature.gov/Reports/18707/\(6\)%20Overflow%20Monthly%20Report\\_6.17.24.pdf](https://malegislature.gov/Reports/18707/(6)%20Overflow%20Monthly%20Report_6.17.24.pdf)

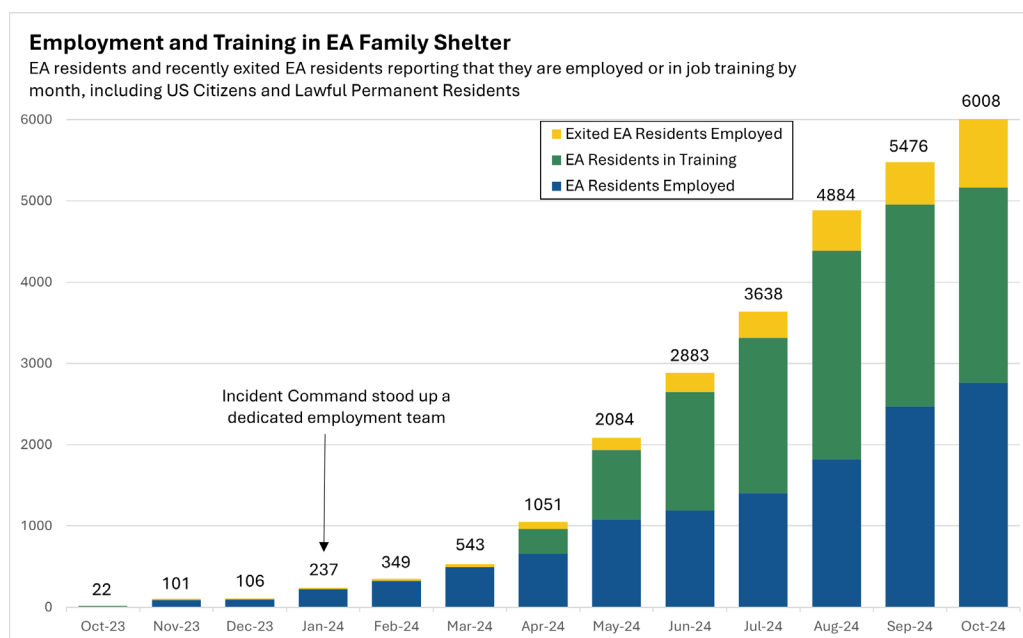
## Report of the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs

beginning of their journey in hopes that families could find work and permanent housing more quickly to avoid shelter. Families deemed eligible for EA shelter would see a lawyer at the FWC and file their EAD authorization. Through a continued partnership with USCIS, the timeline from application to receipt of EAD was further reduced from 5 to 6 weeks to around 3 weeks. This program was expanded at the FWC in Allston in April of 2024 and has been successful at expediting the work authorization process for immigrants. As of October 31, 2024, over 5,000 lawfully present immigrants in EA shelter have filed for work authorization.

### Employment Support (January 2024)

Governor Healey appointed the Employer and Community Engagement team of two employees at EOLWD in January 2024 to assist in expanding the pipeline of employment opportunities for EA shelter residents and to help connect the large number of new arrivals seeking work with the large number of careers and industries facing workforce shortages in Massachusetts. This team serves as the points of contact for employers interested in hiring shelter residents and works with the Department of Career Services, overseeing the 25 MassHire Career Centers and 16 Regional Workforce Boards, to match individuals with job opportunities based on their skillsets, geographic location, and English proficiencies. Through relationships with employers to create hundreds of positions, tailored job preparation services, and improved data collection, the Healey-Driscoll Administration has made significant strides to assist shelter residents access employment and training opportunities as below seen in Figure 5.

**Figure 5. Increased Employment and Training Enrollment Among EA Shelter Residents**





### **Administration Officials Visit Texas Border (June 2024)**

In June of 2024, senior officials from Incident Command, EOHHS, and ORI visited the Texas border to meet with US Border Patrol and community-based organizations serving new arrivals and visit shelter locations. The goal of the visit was to understand how and why new arrivals choose Massachusetts as their destination and to take away lessons learned about how government and community-based organizations manage large inflows of new arrivals. Takeaways of the officials who visited the border included that (1) expectation setting is important, and clarity on the limits to benefits helps families make plans and better leverage their strengths to find permanent solutions; (2) agencies in Texas have a contingency-based strategy rather than an emergency response strategy that allows more flexibility in the face of surges; and (3) cross-functional partnerships are key to help families find permanency.

### **Length of Stay Policy (July 2024)**

In April of 2024, Governor Healey signed Chapter 88 of the Acts of 2024 into law, which included a provision imposing a 9-month limit on EA shelter residents' Length of Stay (LOS) in shelter, with two 90-day extensions available for families who meet certain criteria. The LOS limit is an accountability measure designed to move families through the system more quickly and create vacancies for vulnerable families waiting for shelter placement. EOHLC has implemented the policy on a rolling basis, with approximately 1,000 families receiving notice that their benefit is expiring since the policy went into effect on July 1, 2024.

### **EOHLC Launches Regional Model for EA Shelter Program (July 2024)**

In July 2024, EOHLC launched a new regional model of oversight for the EA shelter program. This model includes designation of Regional Directors overseeing EA shelter across each of four regions statewide: Central & West Region, Northeast Region, Southeast Region, and Boston Region. Each Regional Director oversees a team of contract managers, housing search specialists, and others to support EA shelter providers in their region. Through this model, EOHLC seeks to improve the model of support for families and be better responsive to the different needs of families and the differences in local housing markets, supportive services, and job markets that impact the experience of family homelessness and the ability of families to find safe, supportive, and stable housing.

### **Rapid Rehousing Model at Temporary Respite Centers (August 2024)**

#### **Temporary Respite Centers (TRC)**

Families who do not qualify for rapid placement based on their risk and need prioritization on the EA shelter contact list have access to TRCs, where they access intensive rehousing casework to divert from EA shelter into stable housing. Caseworkers focus on helping families navigate options such as HomeBASE, which provides financial assistance over three years to pay for rent and other rehousing costs, and related stabilization casework. Families also pursue alternative options such as co-locating with another family or reticketing to other states.

Effective August 1, 2024, the Healey-Driscoll Administration made further policy changes to address the continued demand for EA shelter beyond the fiscal and operational capacity of the system. Despite the 4,000 temporary hotels and new permanent sites added by EOHLC, hundreds of families were being sheltered at overflow sites in Cambridge, Chelsea, Lexington, and Norfolk.

This included redesigning the overflow site model to operate as

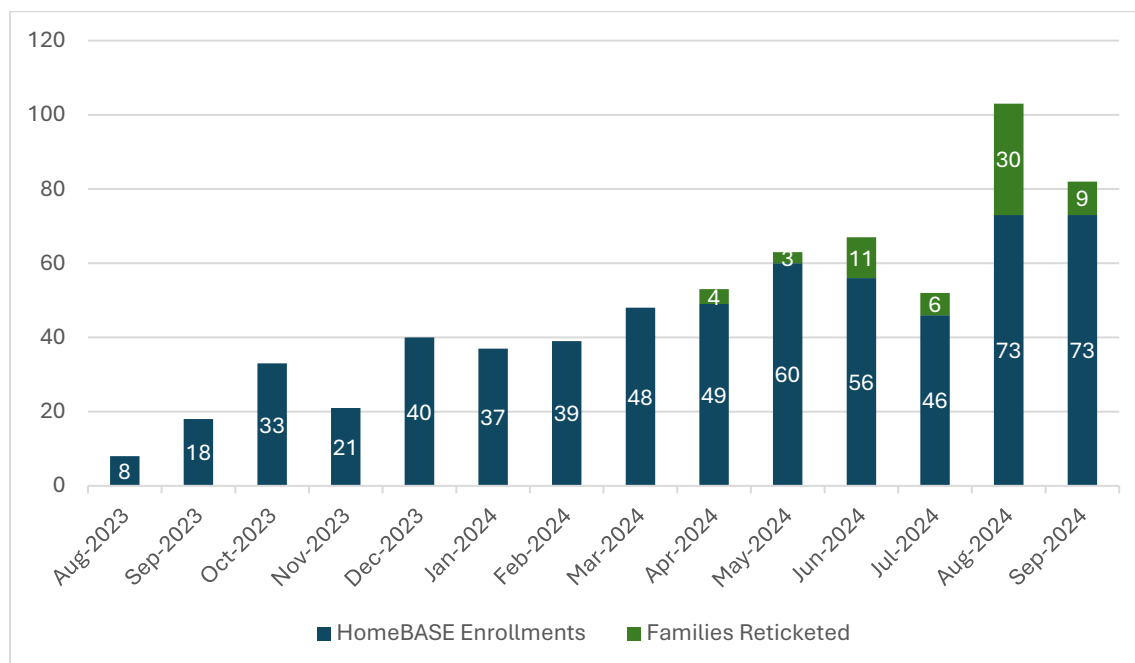
Temporary Respite Centers (TRCs). TRCs have an initial 5-day limit with opportunity for limited extensions for EA-eligible families. During that time, families are provided with intensive case management services focused on rapid rehousing, support to connect families to housing options within their own existing support networks, and financial assistance for travel and moving expenses for families with connections outside of Massachusetts. Families selecting this rapid rehousing model at TRCs receive a six-month delay in EA shelter placement to support their rapid rehousing efforts.

## Present Status of EA System

There continue to be more families seeking access to EA shelter than the system can serve given fiscal and operational constraints. Given that the system continues to face fiscal and operational constraints supporting 7,500 families in EA shelter, it is necessary to address those fiscal deficiencies and an unsustainable caseload in order to best serve families. This Commission has worked hard and thought creatively about how the Commonwealth can both address fiscal deficiencies and help more families become self-sufficient so that the EA shelter program remains sustainable into the future. The recommendation section of this report begins to address reforms to the EA system and recommendations for how to make the EA shelter program sustainable in the future.

Along with sustained demand for shelter, there have also been shifts in how long families stay in EA shelter, and improvements to the tools and services families can access to divert and exit from shelter. EOHLC has prioritized diversions and exits from EA shelter, working with families to find long-term units and access HomeBASE. Following a focus on rehousing and the implementation of the nine-month length of stay policy at EA shelters, the system has seen a decrease in the average length of stay for families.

**Figure 6. Increased Rate of Diversions from EA Shelter Aug. 2023-Sep. 2024**



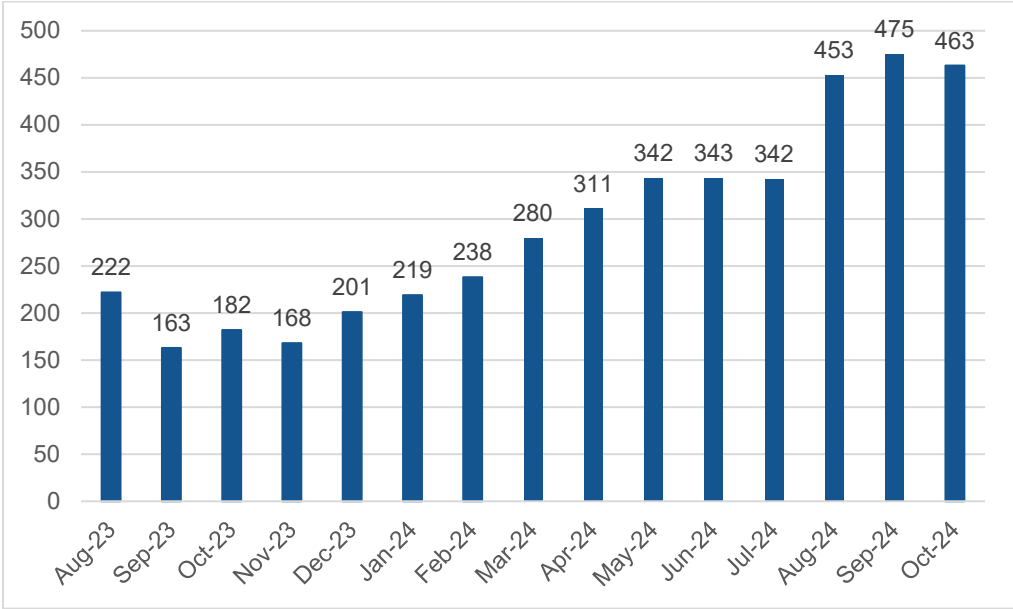
Through diversion programming, families who are eligible for EA shelter can access assistance to obtain stable housing without entering shelter. Diversion providers help families find units and apply to HomeBASE, which provides assistance with rent, moving

Report of the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs

expenses, furniture, and other housing-related expenses. Through diversion, families can also access flexible rehousing funding assistance in the form of Strategic Prevention Initiative (SPI) funds and Enhanced Diversion (ED) funds. Enabling families to return to stable housing without entering shelter decreases the number of destabilizing transitions and the length of time experiencing homelessness. Since August 2023, the number of diverted families has increased rapidly, as Figure 6 illustrates.

Caseworkers work with families in EA shelter to complete a rehousing assessment and plan and find units to leave shelter and enter long-term stable housing. EOHLC and EA shelter providers have worked diligently to increase exits from shelter, using HomeBASE, flexible funding through Strategic Rehousing Initiative (SRI) funds to secure units and cover moving costs, and housing subsidies directed to families in EA shelter. With the improvement of existing tools and development of new ones and a strong focus on rehousing, monthly exits from EA shelter continue to grow and have reached record levels, at 475 families in September 2024 (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7. Extraordinary Growth in Monthly Exits from EA Shelter Aug. 2023-Oct. 2024**



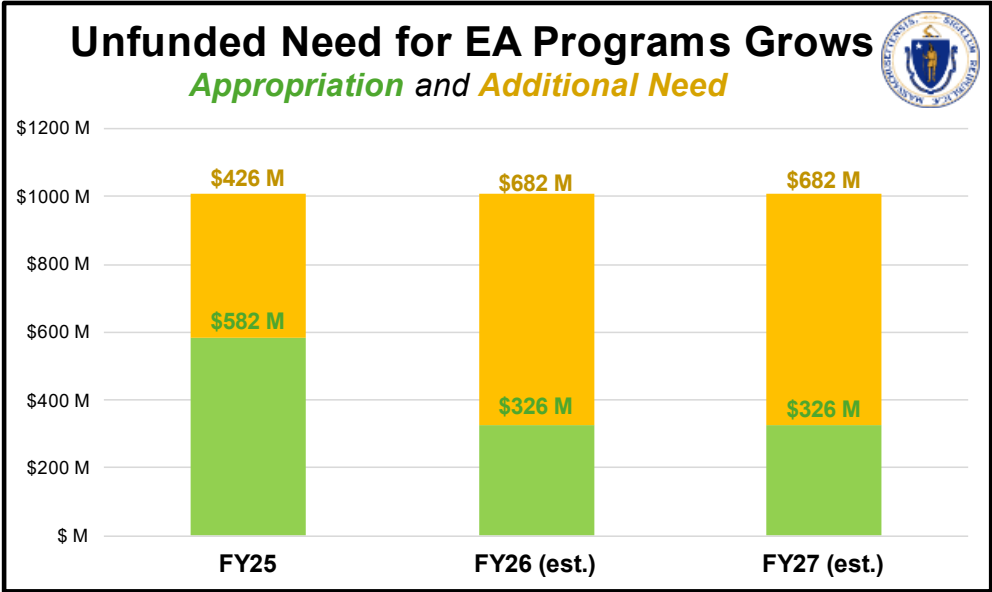
### Fiscal Overview

Since fiscal year (FY) 2023, the legislature has funded the EA shelter program at approximately \$325 million annually, in line with a shelter system serving approximately 3,500 families. The high demand for EA shelter and the expansion of the system to 7,500 families to meet this demand has shifted financial needs well beyond the level of annual appropriations. The legislature has appropriated supplemental funding at a level of approximately \$743 million.

Most supplemental appropriations (those not attached to the 7004-0101 GAA line item) have been funded through the Transitional Escrow Fund (TEF), a temporary source of funding created by the legislature to store one-time savings from FY 2021 and FY 2022 year-end surpluses. Since the beginning of FY 2024, the EA shelter program has been appropriated \$676 million from the TEF. See Figure 9 for more details about specific appropriations.

For FY 2025, the legislature has appropriated \$639 million to the EA shelter system - \$383 million through general appropriations and \$256 million through supplemental funding from the TEF. Given expected expense projections of \$1.094 billion for the EA shelter system for FY 2025, this still leaves a shortfall of \$455 million for the year. If EA shelter expenditures continue to be funded this way, the TEF will likely be fully depleted by the end of FY 2025. Assuming access to the remainder of the TEF funds for FY 2025, the estimated EA shelter deficiency for FY 2026 is \$682 million.

**Figure 8. EA Faces a Large Deficiency for FY 2025-2027 with Current Programming**



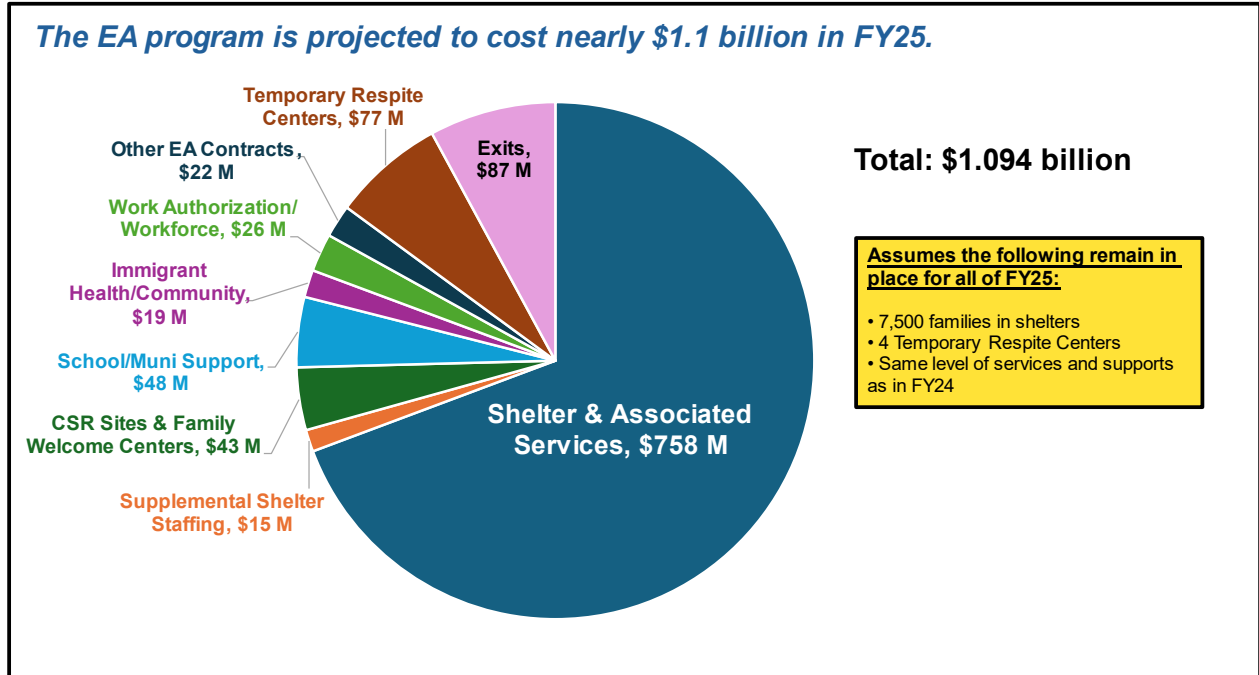
## Report of the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs

With current caseload numbers and services, the EA shelter program is projected to spend \$1.094 billion in FY 2025. Shelter and direct services make up the majority of this expense, at \$776 million. This includes the costs of obtaining and maintaining shelter sites, including hotel and motel rooms and paying for food expenses and case management services for families. Temporary Respite Centers are projected to be the second largest expense, at \$76 million. Figure 10 shows a detailed breakdown of FY 2025 costs of the EA shelter system.

**Figure 9. EA Funding Accounts Since November 2022**

Date Established	Account Name	Amount	Statute	Available Through
November 10, 2022	Immigrants and Refugees Housing Reserve	\$20,000,000	Chapter 268 of the Acts of 2022	June 2027
March 29, 2023	Immigration and Refugee Reserve	\$40,061,776	Chapter 2 of the Acts of 2023	June 2024
March 29, 2023	Immigrants and Refugees Supports Reserve	\$7,000,000	Chapter 2 of the Acts of 2023	June 2024
August 9, 2023	EA Family Shelters and Services	\$325,251,902	FY24 GAA	June 2024
December 4, 2023	Family Shelter and Services Reserve	\$250,000,000	Chapter 77 of the Acts of 2023	June 2024
April 30, 2024	Family Shelter and Services Reserve	\$251,000,000	Chapter 88 of the Acts of 2024	June 2025
April 30, 2024	Family Shelter and Services Reserve	\$175,000,000	Chapter 88 of the Acts of 2024	June 2025
July 29, 2024	EA Family Shelters and Services	\$326,071,903	FY25 GAA	June 2025

**Figure 10. FY 2025 Budget Projections and Categories**



## Stakeholder Feedback

To inform the work of the Commission, individual Commissioners have led listening sessions with external stakeholder groups to solicit feedback on the future of the EA shelter system. External stakeholder listening sessions include:

<b>Listening Session</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Host</b>
EA Shelter and Temporary Respite Center Providers	October 9, 2024	Ed Augustus, Secretary of Housing and Livable Communities
Community-Based Organizations and Advocates	October 25, 2024	Kate Walsh, Secretary of Health and Human Services
Families in Temporary Respite Centers	October 29, 2024	Cristina Aguilera Sandoval, Executive Director, Office for Immigrants and Refugees
Landlords and Property Developers	October 30, 2024	Chris Thompson, Undersecretary for Housing Stabilization
Municipalities	October 31, 2024	Lieutenant Governor Kimberley Driscoll
Families in EA Shelter	November 4, 2024	Ed Augustus, Secretary of Housing and Livable Communities

Major themes cited in the listening sessions include:

- Investment in other housing resources such as affordable housing, permanent supportive housing, and vouchers.
- Increase resourcing and accessibility of prevention, diversion, and exit tools, like RAFT and HomeBASE, including improving application processes, considering adjusting the benefit to meet the market, and making these programs more accessible before an eviction notice or before a family experiences homelessness.
- Improve data to understand the housing needs and demographics of families seeking to access the EA shelter system.
- Strengthen wraparound services for families in EA shelter, including ESOL and immigration services, career development services, and health support.
- Improve families' access to child care and after school programs to facilitate parents' entry into the labor market.
- Invest in shelter sites that account for family need, such as size of families, cooking needs, laundry needs.
- Deepen collaboration between the EA shelter program and departments that supply related services, such as DDS, DPH, DTA.



## Report of the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs

- Provide clearer information in multiple languages about policies and resources, particularly around lengths of stay and extension eligibility, to ease family stress.
- Reconsider policies on length of stay in TRCs and EA shelter.
- Comments on landlord-tenant relationships for families who have exited EA shelter using HomeBASE, the strain on landlords as families who are formerly homeless transition to self-sufficiency, and how this can act as a deterrent to landlords to participate in HomeBASE.

Additional information on feedback collected in connection with listening sessions is included in Appendix B.

### Lessons Learned

The Commission has heard about many improvements to the EA shelter system throughout its meetings and listening sessions. Some of the lessons that can be learned from the ongoing work to serve as many families seeking EA shelter as possible include the following.

- 1. The EA Shelter System is Fiscally and Operationally Unsustainable:** The current level of demand for EA shelter, representing both long-time Massachusetts residents displaced by unaffordable housing and new arrivals, on top of a system serving twice as many families as it has historically, is fiscally and operationally unsustainable. Even before the current extraordinary levels of demand, families in the EA shelter system experienced average lengths of stay in emergency shelter of greater than one year. The EA shelter system was not built to serve as many families as possible as efficiently as possible, and prior surges in demand have been met by scaling up and down investment without taking a critical look at improvements in service models.
- 2. New Populations May Require New Services:** New populations in the EA shelter system have demonstrated the need for more varied services to address families' unique barriers to housing stability. For example, immigrant families may need support to navigate the complex immigration system so that they can receive work authorization; this is a crucial step as they move toward economic self-sufficiency and begin to integrate into Massachusetts communities. The EA shelter system and related services must be nimble and develop its ability to adjust to changing needs in the populations it serves.
- 3. Include Needs-Based Assessment:** The establishment of prioritization criteria has allowed the state and EA shelter providers to triage services according to families'

## Report of the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs

needs and risks through the Clinical and Safety Risk Assessment process. The use of an assessment framework should continue to serve as a valuable tool for the state to appropriately place families in a particular type of site. The introduction of additional needs-based criteria would enable the state to more efficiently distinguish between families that require intensive, longer-term case management services to achieve stability and families who could be rapidly rehoused with the ability to work and limited risk and need factors.

4. **EA Shelter Prevention, Exits, and Diversions are Critical:** To maintain a stable EA shelter system it has been critical for EOHL, in partnership with its providers, to provide assistance, including prevention services, to families before entering shelter; provide access to local resources and services families need to integrate into Massachusetts communities and reduce their time in EA shelter; and implement shelter stay limits coupled with tools for rehousing including housing benefits and rental assistance, intensive case management, individualized employment services and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) supports. Exits and diversions, coupled with shorter lengths of stay, allow the entire EA shelter system to serve more families with the same number of shelter units and investment.
5. **Stakeholder Engagement Informs Policymaking:** Consistent and clear communication with stakeholders has empowered the Healey-Driscoll Administration to adapt throughout the state of emergency and make stakeholder-informed policy decisions. Through the Incident Command Structure, efficient decision and communication pathways have strengthened relationships with families in EA shelter, the provider community, advocates, municipalities, and private market stakeholders such as property owners, developers, and community development corporations. Similarly, Commission listening sessions provided critical feedback loops to inform the findings and recommendations contained in this report.
6. **All-of-Government Response:** The Incident Command structure has been critical for the Healey-Driscoll Administration to leverage expertise and resources across multiple departments and the federal government, including the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and coordinate closely with the legislature. This situation has required coordination from the entire government to respond to rising caseload and meet family needs, and Incident Command, under the leadership of

## Report of the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs

the Governor's Office, has been essential for managing decisions, communications, and prioritization.

## EA Program Findings and Recommendations

The Commission has aligned on key, high-level principles for the EA family shelter system -- family homelessness should be rare, brief, and nonrecurring, the system should be fiscally and operationally sustainable, and the pathways for families in the EA system should not be one-size-fits-all. The Commission's recommendations for the EA family shelter system are built on these three guiding principles.

- 1. Rare:** Family homelessness should be a rare occurrence in the Commonwealth. This means that EA family shelter should be the last resort for families, and that we have designed a system that assists families in keeping their housing or getting back into housing before entering a shelter site. Helping families stay in their homes fosters better health and well-being, and keeping families out of shelter when there are other options builds a sustainable shelter system.
- 2. Brief:** The experience of family homelessness should be brief, and the EA family shelter system must be designed to get families rehoused as quickly as possible. Exiting families back into long-term healthy housing minimizes disruption for these families and helps them towards a path of sustainability and stability. EA shelter is not designed to house families for the long-term, and a long-term stay is not the best outcome for families.
- 3. Non-Recurring:** Family homelessness should be non-recurring, and the services and tools the EA shelter system provides for families should be designed with the goal of avoiding re-entry. Multiple shelter stays increase challenges to health and well-being and increase the barriers to finding and maintaining long-term housing. The EA system must be designed towards sustainable rehousing and consider how to minimize risks of shelter re-entry for families in shelter, and who have exited or diverted.

An EA program designed around these core principles will be more sustainable and better serve families. To build a program that meets these principles, the Commission offers the following recommendations.

### 1. Ensure the EA Shelter System is Fiscally Sustainable

Maintaining the current caseload and service level, the projected cost of the EA system for FY 2025 is \$1.094 billion. Given the FY 2025 EA appropriation of \$326 million, sustaining this level of service would require drawing from the Transitional Escrow Fund (TEF) to depletion

## Report of the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs

in FY 2025 and facing a deficit of \$693 million for FY 2026 without funds from the TEF to support the EA system or other state needs. To maintain a sustainable system to serve families in the long term, the Commission recommends taking steps to reduce costs within the EA system and increase efficiency. A fiscally sustainable EA system means family homelessness is rare; the system costs less when families access assistance to prevent or divert shelter entry through programs such as HomeBASE or RAFT. When family homelessness is brief, families leave EA shelter and access less expensive programs such as HomeBASE. Without the continued support of supplemental funding from the TEF, a gradual reduction in costs towards a fiscally sustainable system is the most responsible course of action to move towards the parameters of legislative appropriation for the EA system.

### 2. Ensure the EA Shelter System is Operationally Sustainable

With the increase in the number of families in the EA system and increased geographic distribution of these families, with approximately 50% in hotels and motels across the Commonwealth, the operational capacity of EA providers, EOHLC staff, and other related service providers has been stretched to an unsustainable level. This system was designed for the previous shelter caseload of 3,500 families, and that number has more than doubled to reach 7,500 families in recent years.

Throughout the system, the EA provider caseworker to family ratio is approximately 1:30, with even higher stabilization service ratios. These operational constraints create additional challenges for families seeking the support they need within a timeline that prioritizes rehousing and ensures homelessness is brief. The Commission recommends taking steps to ensure that the EA program is sustainable with the capacity available to it and does not expand rapidly in an attempt to meet demand. This includes setting standards and best practices to reduce caseload ratios so that EA provider staff have the capacity to fully support families, and easing administrative burdens and coordination between service providers to better utilize the capacity that already exists. Designing a system where homelessness is rare, brief, and nonrecurring increases operational sustainability by decreasing demand for EA shelter, helping families move through shelter more quickly, and averting re-entry, to serve more families with fewer units.

### 3. Emphasize Prevention, Diversion, and Exit Tools

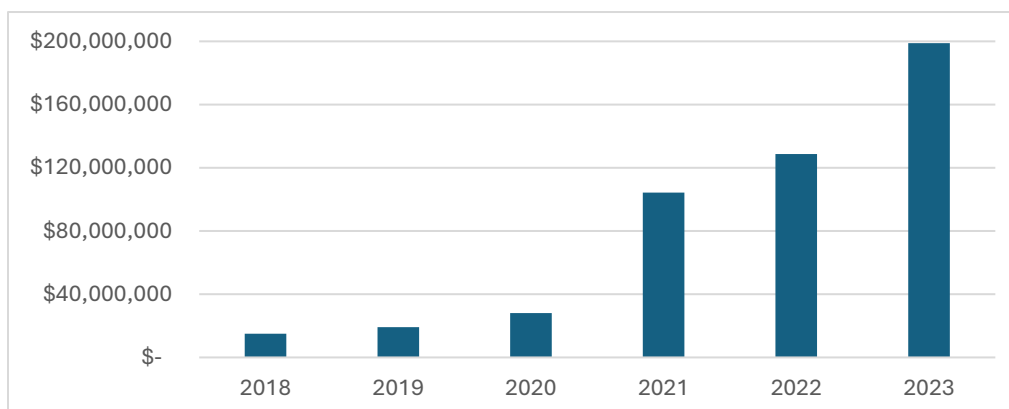
The Commission recommends continued investment within available resources in prevention, diversion, and exit tools to support essential pieces of an EA system where family homelessness is rare, brief, and nonrecurring. Prevention tools such as the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) program help families avoid harmful and destabilizing evictions that bring families into EA shelter and create future housing barriers. RAFT, which provides short-term emergency funding of up to \$7,000 annually for people facing imminent eviction risk, has become an increasingly important tool for families in Massachusetts as rent prices have increased, as evidenced by the increase in RAFT spending since 2018 (shown in Figure 11).

Diversion tools help families rapidly rehouse with access to HomeBASE and flexible funding before entering shelter and access stabilization services to sustain housing after diversion. The Commission recommends continued investment in and focus on prevention and diversion assistance to help ensure family homelessness is rare. Investing in and improving access to diversion provides more families with the opportunity to rehouse before shelter, and helps more landlords house EA families.

Effective and accessible exit tools are essential for making family homelessness brief and nonrecurring, and the Commission recommends continued investment in both tools to assist with rehousing and related tools that support a family's rehousing, such as work authorization and employment training. Improving access to local child care and after school programs will be increasingly important as families seek employment and training opportunities throughout the state. Continued investment in and improvements to programs such as HomeBASE ensures the rehousing process is easier for families, providers, and landlords to navigate and gets families back into sustainable housing quickly.

Investment in workforce-related services for EA families, including job placement support, career and English language training, and reviewing how to best leverage skilled workers' training from outside Massachusetts ensures that parents have access to employment opportunities and the skills required to build income, which is critical for helping a family exit shelter and preventing re-entry. The Commission has discussed the value of connecting new arrivals to industries with high vacancy rates and the beneficial impact of workforce programming like this in attracting and retaining industry partners in Massachusetts, maintaining Massachusetts' competitive advantage. The Commission acknowledges the progress toward supporting family attainment of work authorization and employment and recommends continued focus on programs that provide language and skills training, access to work authorization assistance, access to child care and after school programs, and matching workers with employers throughout the Commonwealth.

**Figure 11. Annual RAFT Spend Since 2018**



#### 4. Limit Reliance on Hotels and Motels as EA Shelter

Beginning in 2022, EA shelter expanded into hotels and motels again to meet rapidly increasing demand. Since the EA shelter system reached capacity at 7,500 families last year, approximately 50% of families have been in hotels and motels across the state. The Commission recommends limiting reliance on hotels and motels to best serve families and increase the financial and operational efficiency of the system, while recognizing that hotels and motels may be a last-resort option for surge capacity at times of rapid changes in demand. Having a contracted shelter service provider with on-site case management and housing search services is critical to successfully serving families in any setting.

Hotels and motels currently make up 46% of the shelter portfolio. Other sites include congregate shelter (private bedrooms and shared living spaces), scattered sites (independent apartments that may better serve families with specific needs), and co-shelter (two unrelated EA families occupying private rooms and shared common areas within one apartment). Data suggests that hotels and motels are the most expensive type of shelter in the EA system, yet often provide each family a studio-style living space without cooking facilities.

These sites were scaled up quickly to respond to the rising demand for EA shelter in 2023, but have presented significant challenges for families, providers, and municipalities. Families rarely have access to kitchens or laundry in hotel and motel rooms, which decreases their ability to control their lifestyle and provide healthy meals to kids. The state expanded into hotel and motel rooms as a temporary solution to support the surge capacity, not as a long-term housing solution for families. It also adds expenses and logistical

challenges for the state and providers in facilitating service and meal delivery. Families are in hotel and motel sites spread throughout the state and sometimes far from public transit, which creates transportation barriers for families and challenges in accessing employment opportunities. Hotel and motel unit sizes are small, which sometimes forces families to house across multiple rooms. These sites reduce family privacy, autonomy, and community connection, which creates additional stress for families. Hotels are neither housing nor appropriate shelter.

It has taken further time to identify contracted shelter providers with the capacity to serve families at hotels, and for these providers to hire staff to provide on-site services, case management, and rehousing support. This means that families in hotels and motels were often getting less engagement with case workers, delaying rehousing work and access to other necessary services. Furthermore, testimony from providers indicates that hotels and motels are not supportive sites for families. The Commission recommends shifting away from current hotel and motel sites in the short term and limiting reliance on these sites for any future surge in demand.

## 5. Maintain Policies that Set Clear Expectations and Outcomes

New length of stay policies introduced into both EA shelter and for TRCs show early promise of addressing longstanding challenges with the EA program, including improving the incentives for families and providers around developing exit strategies that are sustainable and responsive to family strengths and needs. A clear policy and communication around expectations that shelter stay should be brief as appropriate for family needs would allow the EA system to be more sustainable, serve more families, and direct families on a path to exiting into stable housing. A University of Pennsylvania [study](#) using data from Massachusetts family shelters illustrates that a shelter system that creates long stays is more expensive for the shelter system and is detrimental to directing resources towards needs and risks of families and towards long-term stabilization. The Commission recommends setting and communicating clear policies and expectations around family timeframes in shelter and towards exits to ensure our system is driving towards making family homelessness brief, and improving policies based on lessons learned and family needs.



## 6. Move Toward a Needs-Based Model, Away From a One-Size-Fits-All Approach

Policy changes implemented over the last year provide different services and pathways for families with diverse needs in the EA system. The Commission recommends continuing to adjust the system to move away from a one-size-fits-all approach for families. Taking the success and lessons learned from Clinical Safety Risk (CSR) sites and Temporary Respite Centers (TRCs), which focus on intensive case management based on family assessment, the EA system should adjust to provide access to services and pathways by need.

As outlined in the Appendix A, “**Families in the EA System,**” families may have higher need and require access to more intensive, longer-term services, or lower risk, with a path to employment and income and rapid rehousing assistance. The EA system should dedicate services and resources according to these risk assessments and service needs, adjusting the service model and timeframe of EA shelter according to these assessments and needs.

The Commission recommends that the services available in the EA system leverage family strengths to work towards rehousing. Some families can more quickly work toward rehousing, while others with more intensive clinical and human services needs factors may need a longer timeframe or require different tools to exit. Many families require assistance to build income, and through access to career services and work training programs, coupled with access to child care and after school programs, can move towards sustainable, long-term housing as quickly as possible. Increasing investment in workforce training and matching resources for EA families would build on the work families are already doing to exit shelter. As EA families continue to find training and employment opportunities according to their skillsets, interests, and geographic region, the Commission recommends continued focus to improve access to child care and after school programs to facilitate parents’ entry into the labor market. Recognizing that new arrival families represent approximately half of the EA shelter caseload, the expansion of resources around work authorization and language class is an important component of this needs-based model.

The Commission recommends that needs-based considerations be implemented into the EA system across the entire pathway of a family through shelter, from their intake process to prioritization and placement in the type of shelter site, to the services that families access while in and exiting from EA shelter. As part of the implementation of this model, the Commission recommends robust collaboration and communication between federal, state, municipal, and community-based resources to provide needed services efficiently.

## 7. Continue and Improve Regional EA Shelter System Management

The Commission recognizes that regional variations in the housing and labor market, in supportive services, and in the strengths and needs of families can require different approaches to sheltering and rehousing families experiencing homelessness. Regional management of the EA shelter system can better respond to these differences to create a needs-based approach to shelter and rehousing that is not a one-size-fits-all system. Regional management can better ensure that family homelessness is rare by ensuring regional access to prevention and diversion programming, and that it is brief and non-recurring by ensuring regional access to rehousing tools that are responsive to the housing market in particular geographies. State staff who are regionally based can align around regional housing initiatives to increase access to affordable housing and develop EA provider and stakeholder relationships that are localized to support the families in their region. Regional staff can also better coordinate opportunities for continuity of services related to healthcare, education and employment, connect families with regional employment opportunities, create partnerships with local non-profits and community-based organizations, and address region-specific challenges. Regional management can support better alignment of services.

The Commission recommends continuing to implement and improve upon regional management of the EA shelter system.

## 8. Strengthen Affordable Housing Access Across Massachusetts

The Commission recognizes that housing affordability and low vacancy rates have exacerbated these challenges and provided big roadblocks for getting families out of EA shelter and into long-term sustainable housing. Legislation focused on creating housing, such as the Affordable Homes Act, takes significant steps towards helping EA families and all residents across the Commonwealth afford housing in Massachusetts. Increasing access to affordable housing, including by dedicating more resources toward affordable homes for low-income families and exploring opportunities to develop housing on underutilized land, will help prevent families from entering shelter and provide more accessible options towards exit. The creation of a supportive housing pool fund to support more permanent supportive housing would result in more rehousing options for families with higher needs and risks, with the case management and service coordination they may need. Additionally, exploration of innovative, housing-first approaches in other regions across the country would provide more options for transitional housing for EA families to support surge capacity in temporary housing solutions which are more permanent housing situations for families than

emergency shelter. The Commission recommends continuing to pursue policies to bring down housing prices and support vulnerable populations in finding homes, including continuing to review homeless preferences for affordable housing statewide, to make family homelessness rare, brief, and nonrecurring.

## 9. Improve Data Collection, Collaboration, and Analysis

The Commission recommends continuing to refine the data collection, sharing, and analysis processes of the EA system to better understand the needs of families, the services they access, and the gaps in the system. Throughout Commission meetings, members have investigated data, and encourage continued analysis of metrics around who is accessing services within the EA system, analyzing how many EA individuals receive work authorization, employment, and training, numbers of exits and diversions, and per-family costs within the EA system. Implementing the recommendations above requires a better understanding of how families are using the EA system and where successes happen, and gaps remain, and better data collection will show whether the EA program is making progress towards the Commission's principles.

## 10. Convene and Consult with Experts and Stakeholders

The Commission recommends that the Administration and/or legislature further convene and consult with relevant experts and stakeholders, which may include Administration officials, legislators, families, providers, community-based organizations and advocates, and private market stakeholders, to continue the work of this Commission and inform implementation of Commission recommendations.

Subsequent convenings could include, for example, legislative recommendations to assist with the implementation of the recommendations outlined above. Several ideas that may involve legislation were raised throughout the work of this Commission, and would require further consideration and deliberation. Some examples that were raised include codifying certain placement and prioritization directive parameters, assessing eligibility criteria, and updating the length of stay policy.

## Conclusion

This report will be submitted to the Legislature pursuant to Section 23 of Chapter 88 of the Acts 2024. The Commission thanks everyone who participated in the listening sessions and provided oral and written testimony. The Commission thanks all members for participating in meetings, attending listening sessions, and providing input on how to improve the EA program.

This report represents the findings and recommendations of the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs. The report seeks to make findings and recommendations that will improve the sustainability, efficiency and effectiveness of the EA shelter system, how best to support and ensure the long-term sufficiency of those seeking shelter, and creating a regional-based response to support families in need of shelter.

## Appendix A: Families in the EA System

Families in the EA system have a wide range of needs and require varied combinations of services as they work to address barriers to housing and achieve long-term stability.

Many factors might impact the type of support a family requires while in EA, including but not limited to:

- **Disability Status**
- **Physical health needs of parents and children**
- **Mental health needs of parents and children**
- **Single or dual-earner family status**
- **Eviction/credit history**
- **Employment status**
- **Immigration status**
- **Language training needs**
- **Risk of domestic violence**
- **Veteran status**

These considerations impact a family's experience in the EA shelter system, from services during and immediately after intake that provide support for high-risk families, to the duration a family needs to be in EA shelter, to the type of housing assistance upon exit that helps them obtain safety and stability.

To better understand the range of assistance required for families in EA shelter, the Commission has reviewed examples of families with different needs over a series of meetings. The Commission acknowledged that these are limited examples and that families in EA have a wide range of experiences and strengths.

**Example 1:** An immigrant family where both parents are eligible for work authorization and able to work full time.

This family needs support to apply for work authorization and may need assistance accessing language classes and employment services. This family will also need assistance through state resources such as HomeBASE and flexible rehousing funds to rapidly rehouse into longer-term housing outside of the EA shelter system.

**Example 2:** A family with a single earner that has been evicted from Massachusetts housing due unstable income that led to rental arrears.

This family needs access to employment and training services to stabilize and grow their income. They may also need assistance in remediating their eviction history or rebuilding

## Report of the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs

their credit score. This family would benefit from access to more intensive rehousing assistance such as a rental subsidy combined with the HomeBASE program.

**Example 3:** A family that has a child with multiple chronic conditions and disability requiring high levels of medical and educational care.

This family has a complex set of needs and will likely need a longer stay in EA shelter, with more frequent case management and access to intensive health services. This family would benefit from access to permanent supportive housing services as they exit from EA shelter.

Before the policy changes that were implemented over the past year, all these families followed the same pathway through the EA system, with the same access to services within the EA system. If they had additional needs, care was provided *outside* the EA system through referrals.

Now, the EA system has begun to shift toward creating pathways and services *within* the system to address the different needs of families. New structures introduced to achieve this include: FWCs, EA Prioritization Framework, Clinical and Safety Risk Assessment Sites, Temporary Respite Centers, Rehousing Assessments and Plans, and directed diversion and exit assistance.

### **Pathways while in EA Shelter**

Additionally, EOHLC has worked to improve pathways for families in EA shelter to better respond to their individual needs. Families in EA shelter sites work with case managers to better understand what they need to reach a sustainable exit, through rehousing plans. This process helps families identify their path to exit and helps case managers identify and make referrals for additional services families require, such as medical support, food assistance, childcare benefits, or resources to help apply for work authorization and access employment assistance. State programs such as Temporary Protected Status (TPS) Clinics have begun to provide opportunities for shelter providers and families to access specific services around immigration needs. With expanded resources for services around work authorization, employment, and language training, and increased access to exit tools such as HomeBASE or housing subsidies, families can start to get what they need to successfully exit EA shelter.

## Appendix B: List of Written Testimony Received from Organizations

As part of the Commission's engagement with external stakeholders, organizations and individuals had the opportunity to submit written testimony to inform the work of the Commission. The submitted testimony from organizations can be accessed at this link: <https://www.mass.gov/lists/emergency-housing-assistance-commission-written-testimony>

The following organizations submitted written testimony to inform the work of the Commission:

- Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program
- Behavioral Health Partners of MetroWest
- Action for Boston Community Development Inc.
- Boston Immigration Justice Accompaniment Network (two submissions)
- City of New Bedford Office of Housing and Community Development
- City of Salem Recommendations and Report on the Demobilization of the Emergency Assistance Shelter at Salem State University
- Conference of Boston Teaching Hospitals
- Emmaus Inc.
- Family Promise Metro West
- Greater Boston Legal Services
- Heading Home
- Housing Families Org.
- International Institute of New England
- Lexington Refugee Assistance Program
- Massachusetts Coalition for Health Equity
- Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless
- Massachusetts Council of Churches
- Massachusetts Law Reform Institute
- Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition
- One Family Inc.
- Providers' Council
- Salem Ward Five Councilor
- United Way of Massachusetts Bay

## Appendix C: Additional Recommendations from Individual Commission Members

The following additional recommendations were submitted by Commission members Sen. Fattman and Rep. Frost:

### **1. Codify Governor Healey's August 1, 2024 Emergency Assistance Placement Prioritization Directive**

In an effort to control cost and demand of the EA system, we recommend codifying into state statute (*M.G.L. ch.23B §30*) Governor Healey's August 1, 2024 Emergency Assistance Placement Prioritization Directive. Codifying this directive would ensure that placement is prioritized for families facing a no-fault eviction, sudden or unusual circumstances in Massachusetts beyond a family's control (such as a flood or fire), families who have at least one member who is a veteran, families with a member that has significant medical needs, families with newborn children, individuals at risk of domestic violence, or families that are homeless because of a fire, flood, or other disaster.

### **2. Establish a 6 Month Residency Requirement for EA Shelter System Applications**

As myself, Representative Frost, and other legislative colleagues have advocated for through various legislative vehicles during the 2023-2024 legislative session, we recommend that EOHLC establish a 6 month Massachusetts residency requirement for all EA shelter system applications. It is imperative that Massachusetts residents receive priority for shelter placement through the EA system. Out of fairness, Commonwealth residents should be afforded placement priority as out-of-state families and individuals have comprised the majority of those being served in the wake of the massive applicant increase that was witnessed beginning in 2022, and only continued to accelerate thereafter.

### **3. Shorten the EA Length of Stay Policy to 6 Months**

Although we believe the Governor's July 1, 2024 Length of Stay (LOS) reduction to 9 months and two potential 90 day extensions for families that meet certain criteria is a step in the right direction, we recommend that the LOS reduction be further reduced to 6 months while maintaining the two potential 90 day extensions for families that meet the criteria. This reduction is aimed at ensuring that families can move through the system more quickly and that vacancies can be available for vulnerable families in desperate need of shelter. In line with the 9-month LOS reduction policy being signed into law through *Chapter 88 of the Acts of 2024*, we recommend that the 6-month reduction be amended in statute, and further recommend that it take effect 14 days following enactment for all new EA applications received on that date and forward.