FACT SHEET
Emergency Assistance Program in Massachusetts

Massachusetts is a “Right to Shelter” state by law
Massachusetts is among the few states in the country with a “right to shelter” law guaranteeing emergency shelter for homeless families who meet certain eligibility requirements, subject to appropriation from the Legislature, per Section 30 of Part I, Title II, Chapter 23B of the Massachusetts General Laws.

Emergency housing is only provided to families with children and/or those who are pregnant
Only families with children and pregnant individuals with no other children may be eligible for placement in state emergency shelter.

Emergency Assistance services are fully funded by the state
The Massachusetts family homelessness system is called the Emergency Assistance (EA) program and is operated and overseen by the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC). Massachusetts covers the cost of emergency shelter services for eligible families, including eligible costs for education, food assistance, medical care, and other basic needs. In April 2024, Governor Healey signed a supplemental budget that provides $251M for shelter-related costs.

Massachusetts has seen a steady rise in shelter demand
The emergency shelter system has had to expand each month since September 2022 in order to meet increases in need, as the result of factors such as rising housing costs in every region, and new arrivals to the state. Additionally, with an increasingly tight housing market and significant delay in federal work authorizations, more families are experiencing homelessness and fewer are exiting shelter into their own stable, permanent housing.

Expanding shelter capacity and permanent housing requires local, state, federal partnership
Non-profit service providers help oversee state-run family shelters, which include 3,600 permanent shelter units statewide. Since late 2022, EOHLC has added nearly 4,000 temporary hotel and new permanent sites. EOHLC is working with local, federal and state partners to help shelter eligible families, including by increasing the HomeBASE benefit.

Statewide coordinated approach will help meet increased needs
The administration has implemented an Incident Command Structure, including the Governor’s Office, Administration and Finance, Health and Human Services, Housing and Livable Communities, Public Safety and Security, Labor and Workforce Development, and Education that will develop a cross-agency approach to help meet the needs of families who are struggling. Additionally, with leadership at the Office of Refugees and Immigrants, the state is better accommodating the unique needs of new arrivals.
What does it mean to be a “right to shelter” state?
Massachusetts is among the few states in the country with a “right to shelter” law for homeless families, meaning low-income Massachusetts families with children under 21 or pregnant women who meet certain eligibility requirements have a legal right to shelter. Because of this law, Massachusetts has one of the lowest rates of unsheltered family homelessness in the country.

What is required for a family to qualify for emergency assistance?
Families without a safe place to stay may be deemed eligible if they meet the following criteria:

- Be a resident of Massachusetts, and be living in the U.S. with the knowledge and consent of the Department of Homeland Security
- Meet the gross income standards and asset test for Emergency Assistance
- Have children under the age of 21, or be pregnant

The reason for homelessness must be one of the following:

- No-fault fire, flood, natural disaster, condemnation, or foreclosure
- Fleeing domestic violence (current or within past 12 months)
- No-fault eviction
- Child(ren) are exposed to a substantial health and safety risk

What are the income requirements to qualify?
The household must have gross monthly income equal to or less than 115% of the Federal Poverty Level adjusted for household size. The household’s total countable assets must also not exceed $5,000. For a family of three, for example, they must have a household income under $2,382 per month.

What is the nature of families currently accessing emergency shelter in Massachusetts?
Half of the families in the EA system are local Massachusetts families who are experiencing homelessness. To be eligible for shelter, at least one household member must be a citizen, a green card holder, or be present in the U.S. with the knowledge and consent of the Department of Homeland Security.

How long do families stay in emergency shelters?
EOHLC and its non-profit partners will work with families to help rapidly place them into stable housing of their own. In April 2024, the MA legislature passed a length of stay policy, which limits families to 9-months in shelter with options to extend their stay under specific circumstances.

Families may have the option to extend shelter for up to two 3-month periods if they meet certain criteria specified in the law.
Extensions may be granted if specific criteria is met like employment, training program participation, veteran status, disability status, school enrollment, or imminent placement in housing.

**Does the EA system have a capacity limit?**
Due to constraints on shelter space, service providers, and funding, the EA program cannot safely expand beyond 7,500 families. As families exit the shelter system, new families will enter vacated units.

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.

**What is the EA waitlist?**
The state is not able to expand shelter capacity beyond 7,500 shelter units. Due to this, the family shelter system may not have enough space to shelter every eligible family right away. If a family applies and are eligible but there is no unit available, they will be placed on a waitlist.

Each EA eligible family will be asked to complete a Clinical and Safety Risk Screening. This helps identify the priority order for families on the waitlist based on urgent health needs and/or personal safety risks.

Families that have similar needs/risks will be ranked based on when they were found eligible. If you would like to know more, you can read more about the EA waitlist here.

**Where do families go if they do not have a place to stay and are on the EA waitlist?**
The state has established multiple overflow shelter options for families who do not otherwise have a safe alternative space to stay.

Families utilizing overflow shelter are required to document engagement in case management and rehousing efforts monthly to remain eligible for overflow shelter. You can read more about these engagement requirements here.

**Does EOHLC provide advance notice to municipalities when expanding emergency shelter locations?**
EOHLC strives to provide local and state officials with as much advance notice as possible when siting an emergency shelter and regularly meets with local partners to coordinate service delivery and address local concerns.

**How many municipalities are currently sheltering eligible families?**
As of May 2024, more than 80 communities across Massachusetts are currently hosting homeless families. Collaboration with cities and towns has been a critical component in meeting the state’s obligations and providing a safe place for families to stay.
**Why are hotels being utilized in some communities?**
There is a critical shortage of available shelter beds. EOHLC has increased shelter capacity through every available avenue, including the use of hotels and motels when there are no other available options for immediate placement needs.

**Why are multiple families being housed within one hotel location?**
Congregate settings make it feasible for service providers to assist families effectively. Families need access to food, formula, diapers and other necessities, as well as access to services and supports.

**Are hotels going to be used as a long-term solution?**
No, using hotels and motels for shelter is a last resort, interim solution to meet our legal obligations to provide emergency shelter. Our ultimate goal is to connect families with safe, secure, long-term housing.

**How are the emergency family shelters managed?**
Typically, congregate emergency shelters have a 24/7 on-site service provider that coordinates families’ access to food and other necessities and arranges building security, routine cleaning and maintenance, case management, connections to resources, housing search assistance and the coordination of direct care.

**Is there enough staff to manage the growing need for assistance?**
To meet the growing need, EOHLC will also need to keep expanding its staff. Additional staff have been hired and more will be onboarded over the coming weeks. EOHLC has also made numerous internal promotions and adjustments to meet vital needs. Non-profit family shelter providers across the state are also working to expand their staff to meet unprecedented needs.

**Will my municipality be covered for school costs?**
Schools receive emergency aid for transportation, enrollment, and other extra costs incurred that are associated with educating these students at a rate of $104 per student per day. Service providers and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (DESE) work with impacted school districts to ensure that the educational needs of any school-aged child living in an emergency shelter are met as quickly as possible. Governor Healey signed a supplemental budget that allows school districts to receive emergency aid more quickly for costs associated with educating children placed in new shelters. Otherwise, the districts would have had to wait much longer for funding for these students to be incorporated into their state education aid.

School districts are also able to apply for DESE’s [Emergency Support Grant](#) for students placed in new emergency shelters. This grant provides $1,000 per student for immediate needs such as laptops, school supplies, tutors and other supports the district identifies.
Is there any other relief available?

The Healey-Driscoll Administration launched a program to financially support municipalities that host or hosted emergency assistance hotels/motels if they experience a drop in local hotel excise tax from last year. To date, the state has reimbursed 28 municipalities $1,168,480 for potential lost local occupancy tax revenue.

Will the children be enrolled in the public school where the shelter is located?
While some of them may, others will not. Some children will not be school-aged and others are already enrolled in other school districts in Massachusetts and will continue to attend those schools. Under federal law, known as the McKinney-Vento Act, homeless children are guaranteed access to school in either their host community or home community, based on what is best for the child to ensure access to education.

How does the state support children in the EA system who are enrolled in school?
Every school district across the state has a homeless liaison who ensures that children who are homeless have access to a public education. Liaisons facilitate enrollment, ensure students are connected to appropriate educational and support services including free school meals, and refer families to community services.

How will meals be provided?
Service providers identify and partner with vendors to either provide food service if families do not have access to cooking facilities or aid them in securing groceries – often leveraging benefits like SNAP – if they do have access to kitchens/kitchenettes. In some situations, at temporary hotel placements, arrangements are made with hotel staff to provide catered meals to family shelter residents. In some communities, service providers partner with local restaurants to provide meals for families.

Is language assistance being provided?
EOHLC provides free over-the-phone language translation services, service providers seek to hire multilingual onsite staff, and where possible, onsite interpreters are made available.

Are there additional services for newly arrived immigrants?
In May 2023, the Healey-Driscoll Administration awarded $1.75 million to form the Immigrant Assistance Services (IAS), a new program designed to assist newly arrived immigrants in Massachusetts so they can access services that address their immediate needs. IAS is a collaborative program between EOHLC and the Office of Refugees and Immigrants (ORI), administered by the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition (MIRA). Funding supports up to 800 individuals and families who are currently living in emergency homeless shelter placements with services such as immediate advice and referrals, targeted and more comprehensive case management, legal services, and other support for which they may be eligible.
What types of immigration status do most new arrivals applying for EA have? And do they have financial sponsors?

The overwhelming majority of new arrivals who have accessed EA shelters or been placed on the EA waitlist over the past year have been granted temporary Humanitarian Parole at the US Southern Border by federal immigration officials. These families entered the US after making an appointment with Customs and Border Protection (CBP) at a designated port of entry using the CBP-One App. This process requires people seeking to request asylum to complete an application, be subject to US and international background checks, and identify a final destination in the US if granted entry. This process does not require identification of a financial sponsor, unlike other immigration processes including Cuban, Haitian, Nicaraguan, Venezuelan (CHNV) Humanitarian Parole.

How does the budget support emergency shelter needs?
Fundamentally, addressing family homelessness requires a multi-faceted set of policies including shelter, supportive services, education, workforce training, and affordable housing programs that enable families to leave shelter for stable housing.

The Healey-Driscoll Administration’s FY25 budget proposal recommended $325 million for the EA program, which would fund the program level to the FY24 allocation. This will allow the office to maintain roughly 4,100 shelter units and associated services. In the supplemental budget filed on January 24, 2024, the Healey-Driscoll administration proposed funding most of the remaining projected FY25 costs, including increased caseload and municipal supports, with one-time funding from the Transitional Escrow Fund. While the Legislature did not appropriate the full balance of the TEF to support shelter and associated services, it did allocate $175 million from the fund to supplement the expected FY25 budget appropriation. The Administration will continue to work with its legislative partners to address additional projected EA costs in FY25.

Does the state perform background checks on families in shelter?
Yes, families must be determined eligible for Emergency Assistance shelter by the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities, which requires specific documentation, including have a documented immigration status, before being added to the EA waitlist and referred to an overflow site. All adults also undergo background checks prior to being placed in an overflow site.

Why hasn’t this program been offered to other homeless residents, like veterans?
Under the Right to Shelter law, Massachusetts has an obligation to shelter families that meet certain eligibility requirements. Individuals without children are not eligible for Emergency Assistance family shelter.

Regarding veterans, the Healey-Driscoll Administration recently announced a $20 million campaign to end veteran homelessness in Massachusetts, including outreach to veterans experiencing homelessness, investments in permanent housing, and expanded wrap-around services. Our
mission is to make Massachusetts the national leader in veterans services and ensure every single veteran has a safe and stable place to call home. For more information, see https://www.mass.gov/news/healey-driscoll-administration-launches-campaign-to-end-veteran-homelessness-in-massachusetts
LEAD AND MANGANESE:

**Question:** Are there elevated lead and manganese levels in the drinking water system at Bay State Correctional Center?

The MCI-Norfolk Public Water System (PWS) includes Bay State, Cedar Junction, MCI Norfolk and Pondville. Prior to 2018, elevated lead levels occurred at one sampling location in 2016 and 2017 at Cedar Junction. Plumbing fixtures were replaced to resolve the issue. Elevated levels of iron and manganese were also detected and resulted in the construction of a new water treatment plant in 2018. Based on an inspection in 2023 by the MassDEP Drinking Water Program, PWS is currently meeting all drinking water standards.

MERCURY:

**Question:** Was the former piggery tested for mercury and remediated?

The former piggery facility is not located on the same site as the temporary overflow shelter and will be inaccessible to families.

DOC sampled the former piggery facility for mercury. Mercury was detected at extremely low levels in surface debris and in the sediment of the floor drains. The concentrations detected are well below any regulatory standard that would require remediation and do not pose a risk.

ASBESTOS:

**Question:** Have the Bay State buildings that will be used as an overflow shelter for homeless families been tested for asbestos?

Yes, according to the Department of Corrections, BSCC has been surveyed for asbestos as required by state regulations. The materials sampled for asbestos came back as non-detect.

LEAD PAINT

**Question:** Have the Bay State buildings that will be used as an overflow shelter for homeless families been tested for lead paint?

Yes. BSCC has been tested for lead. Survey testing was completed on 5/23/2024, as required when construction work is planned. The DOC has contracted with a licensed lead removal vendor to abate all the loose and flaking paint in the facility.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health conducted site visits on June 14, 2024, and June 17, 2024. During these site visits, DPH interviewed staff to understand the intended use of the rooms, common areas, and exterior space. DPH staff walked the property with responsible individuals to
identify any lead hazards, including loose lead paint, and paint on accessible or mouthable surfaces like windowsills, and windows in poor condition. Most of the space planned for use was built post-1978; however, there is one building that was built in 1938 that was extensively renovated circa 1986. During the assessment, the inspector did not identify any lead paint hazards in the interior of the buildings. Testing on the exterior of the building where the occupants may have access also did not identify any lead hazards. The inspector took multiple dust samples and is awaiting results. If these dust samples fail, DPH will review cleaning requirements and return for repeat sampling. Once DPH has determined that the dust samples are within allowable levels, the staff will provide a report detailing the planned site usage and mitigation strategies and dust sample results.

PEST CONTROL:

Question: What efforts are taking place to address pest control in the facility?

DOC utilizes the state-wide contract for pest exterminators. The use of the vendor continued after all incarcerated individuals were transferred out of the facility. With new occupants arriving, Heading Home, has secured a pest control vendor who will be on-site regularly.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

Question: Why was an EIS not conducted at the site?

No. Environmental review under the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) is required if a project requires certain state and municipal authority approvals and meets or exceeds review thresholds set forth in MEPA regulations. MEPA review thresholds relate to minimum levels of environmental impacts and can be found at 301 CMR 11.03. Common MEPA review thresholds include land alteration (over 25 acres), wetlands alteration (over ½ acre for most resource areas), and traffic (over 2,000 new daily vehicular trips, or 1,000 if combined with 150 new parking spaces). We note that an “EIS” refers to an “Environmental Impact Statement” required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), not MEPA; we are not presently aware of any federal approvals that may trigger the need for NEPA review.