

FAQs – Frequently Asked Questions

October 27th, 2023

REACHING CAPACITY

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

The Commonwealth will continue to find and fund shelter for approximately 7,500 homeless families, including hotel and motel units, but we do not anticipate being able to continue to expand the number of shelter units beyond that point.

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

As families exit the shelter system, new families will enter vacated units.

The hard reality is that we do not have the funding, service provider partners, or other resources needed to safely shelter any more than approximately 7,500 unhoused families.

Continued expansion at current rates will push the cost far beyond what can be paid for with our current appropriation and the supplemental appropriation already requested. The state’s shelter provider partners are stretched beyond their capacity. And we are finding it harder and harder to add new units to our shelter portfolio and to ensure that families are safe in shelter and have access to basic necessities, such as food, formula, and diapers.

When will capacity be reached?

We will reach our family shelter capacity at approximately 7,500 families.

Are eligibility requirements changing?

Eligibility requirements are not being changed.

What will happen to families who are eligible for placement, but you have no capacity to place them?

If there is no capacity on a given day, families determined eligible for EA will be placed on a waitlist maintained by our administration and will be provided with information about shelter alternatives and community resources.

We continue to work with partners to identify short-term, overflow sites, and continue to call on the federal government for assistance.

What information will families be provided with if they are not placed into shelter?

Families will be provided assistance with transportation to locations within Massachusetts of their choosing, information on additional state resources and alternatives to shelter (e.g. HomeBASE), and alternative ways to seek assistance (e.g. 211).

What are the alternatives to family shelter?

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

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

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

WAITLIST

How does the waitlist work?

As families exit the shelter system, new families will enter vacated units. If there is no capacity on a given day, families will be placed on a waitlist and notified when a unit becomes available. The order of the waitlist is based on whether a family has a clinical and safety risk priority designation combined with when they were deemed eligible.

How will families be notified if a unit opens up for them?

Placements will be made starting with families at the top of the waitlist who have the highest Clinical and Safety Risk designation. Families on the waitlist will be contacted by phone, email, and text when a shelter unit is available that can accommodate their household. Families will have until 12PM the next business day to accept placement.

If waitlist notifications will be provided via call or text, how will you ensure families can receive this information if they don't have a US phone? Access to internet?

If a unit opens for a family, we will make multiple attempts to reach them by each of the contact formats they provide (phone, email, and text).

Will you be sending status updates to families on the waitlist?

No. Families can call (866) 584-0653 between 8 am and 5 pm, Monday through Friday, to find out whether they are still on the waitlist or if we have a shelter unit for them. We cannot tell a family their place on the waitlist. We will notify families when a unit opens up for them.

How will you clear the backlog that the waitlist could create?

EOHLC will be working with families currently in shelter to help speed up exits. Availability of shelter units depends not only on how many families are coming in, but also how many are leaving.

Are there reasons that a family might be removed from the waitlist?

If EOHLC has not yet been able to find shelter for a family on the waitlist and the family still has not provided all documents needed to demonstrate EA eligibility after 30 days, they may be removed from the waitlist after 30 days.

A family also may be removed from the waitlist if they are offered a shelter spot on three separate occasions and do not respond by noon the next business day.

INTAKE AND PRIORITIZATION

How will people apply for EA now?

Families will be able to apply for the EA program in person at EA Field Offices and the Quincy Family Welcome Center, or through the EA phone line. All families will be screened for EA eligibility prior to placement. This includes completing the EA application, verifying identity, verifying familial relationship, checking DTA's BEACON database, and gathering all available documentation.

Families applying for EA shelter will also be asked to complete a Clinical and Safety Risk pre-screen questionnaire to self-report immediate clinical and/or safety risk concerns that may necessitate priority for placement. (Translated forms will be available).

If they are determined eligible, the information provided by the family on the pre-screen questionnaire will be shared with licensed clinicians who will perform a medical assessment.

Families will be added to the waitlist if EOHLC determines that they are “presumptively eligible” (they appear eligible based on their application, interview, and other information available to EOHLC and have provided documents to verify identity and familial relationship) or “fully eligible” (they have provided all verifications). When a family rises to the top of the waitlist, they can be placed so long as they have been determined at least presumptively eligible. Families who elect not to complete the questionnaire will still be added to the waitlist but will not be prioritized based on clinical concerns.

What are the hours of operation? Weekends?

Intake will be conducted Monday – Friday 8am-5pm. Intake will not be conducted on the weekends. Families who want to apply in person should check EOHLC’s website for days of operation, as not all field offices are open five days a week.

Why do families now have to fill out a Clinical and Safety Risk pre-screen?

Families with clinical and/or safety risks are prioritized for shelter placement. The Clinical and Safety Risk pre-screen identifies clinical or safety risks that may require shelter prioritization. A family may choose not to fill out the pre-screen, but they then will not be prioritized based on clinical concerns.

Families that demonstrate a clinical risk in the pre-screen will complete a full medical assessment to further establish prioritization.

How will the full medical assessment be performed?

Medical assessment will be performed by a licensed clinician. Families will have 3 options: (1) in-person assessment at a designated site, (2) providing an information request and release to their existing healthcare provider allowing the provider to provide information to a licensed clinician via electronic fax or phone call, or (3) virtual assessment conducted by phone with a licensed clinician.

Who are the licensed clinicians?

Registered Nurses, Nurse Practitioners, Physician Assistants, and Physicians contracted by the Department of Public Health (DPH) and contracted providers with licenses to practice in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

What are examples of clinical and safety risks?

Examples of clinical risks that will be assessed by licensed clinicians include a family with an infant under 9 months of age, a pregnant family member whose pregnancy is high-risk or in the third trimester, or a family member who has an immunocompromised condition. Other examples include having a primary caregiver over the age of 70, or a family member who takes medicine that needs to be refrigerated or uses special medical equipment on a daily basis or has 3 or more chronic medical conditions.

Safety risks include immediate risk of domestic violence.

Can families refuse a pre-screen or medical assessment?

Yes, neither the pre-screen nor a medical assessment is required for EA eligibility or placement. They are tools for further understanding prioritization for placement if and when the number of families eligible for EA exceed the number of available placements in the system.

Why are you prioritizing placements?

In order to ensure families with the greatest health or safety risks are placed into shelter, we are following standardized processes that have been developed alongside experts and are designed to ensure equity in our placement system.

How was the prioritization framework developed? With whom?

The prioritization framework for clinical risks was developed by medical and public health experts at the Department of Public Health. Using clinical experience and public health expertise and guided by data on health risks associated with homelessness as well as characteristics of the population entering the EA shelter system, the team developed and refined criteria that seeks to identify individuals in families who face the greatest risk of health complications if not immediately placed into the EA shelter system.

The prioritization framework for non-clinical safety risks was developed in consultation with the Department of Transitional Assistance (domestic violence) and the Department of Children and Families (other critical safety risks affecting children).

RIGHT TO SHELTER

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

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

Can the Administration pursue these policies without the Legislature?

Both MGL c. 23B Section 30 and the EA line item (7004-0101) emphasize that the EA program is subject to appropriation. Under state finance law, state agencies are not allowed to incur costs when there is no currently identified or reasonably likely source of payment.

Will there be emergency regulations? Draft guidance?

EOHLC issued emergency regulations and guidance on October 31, both of which will be available for public comment.

EXIT STRATEGIES AND OTHER BENEFITS

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

Our administration is evaluating strategies for helping families who have been in shelter long-term (such as over 15 months) exit shelter into more stable housing. The shelter system is intended to be a short-term, emergency option.

- In an effort to help families exit emergency shelter and move into more stable housing options, the administration has expanded its HomeBASE program, which helps cover rent and other costs for families with children under 21 years old or pregnant people.
- The maximum HomeBASE benefit has been raised from \$20,000 to \$45,000 to provide over three years, previously 24 months, in rental assistance and related support.
- Additionally, to help more families access the program faster, presumptively eligible families can now access HomeBASE funds, and landlords can receive a bonus payment equal to one month's rent for a successful lease up.
- The Administration will also offer **mobile vouchers** to the approximately 1,200 EA families who have been in EA longer than 18 months. Rental vouchers are among the most effective, evidence-based interventions to end family homelessness. Mobile vouchers, also known as tenant-based vouchers, are rental vouchers which are valid for any housing unit that meets the standards of the state sanitary code. They are not tied to a specific unit like a project-based voucher.
- EOHLC is exploring other ways to work with families, as well as landlords and shelter providers, to make it easier for families to exit shelter, or to use the HomeBASE benefit to avoid having to enter shelter in the first place.

Is the state placing a time-limit on family's length of stay in shelter?

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

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

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

The administration has launched several programs to provide legal assistance to EA families and help shelter residents start working, including a new partnership with Commonwealth Corporation Foundation to connect businesses to individuals in shelter who are still waiting for their work authorization but looking to gain on-the-job training and skills development.

This new program is beginning as a pilot, starting with Salem but with interest in building business partnerships in other shelters and communities over time. Interested employers and businesses should contact LWDBusinessinfo@mass.gov.

EXISTING SHELTER OPERATIONS

Will placements continue to be made in my community?

As families transition out of emergency shelter into permanent housing, eligible families may be placed in vacated shelter units. Additionally, as some hotel units and other shelter sites cease to be available, we may need to place families in new communities at new supplemental shelter sites.

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

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

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

The state will no longer expand our net shelter portfolio beyond approximately 7500 units; however, we will continue to book and contract with new hotels as other hotel reservations expire.

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

We do not have a definitive timeline to offer currently.

Will the Family Welcome Centers remain open?

The Quincy Family Welcome Center will serve as an intake site with Homeless Coordinators co-located in the Welcome Center. The shelter located on the same campus will be a medical assessment site.

Both Family Welcome Centers (FWCs) will continue to provide services to families arriving in Massachusetts by assisting families to enroll in state benefits, providing basic resources and necessities such as a hot meals, diapers, warm clothes, masks and hygiene kits, connecting families with other community-based resources and supports.

FWCs will continue to work with families on a case-by-case basis to determine a safe housing alternative and assist them with transportation to that location.

How can families who live far from FWCs access these basic services?

Families across the Commonwealth can access a range of services and supports through the Family Resource Center network.

Will the shelter at Joint Base Cape Cod remain open?

Yes. It will remain open and continue to serve the current number of families.

Will the National Guard continue to staff the shelters that didn't have provider partners?

Yes.

SCHOOLS

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

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

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

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

Does reaching capacity impact school enrollment?

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