

# Number of homeless and migrant families in Massachusetts shelters hits state's limit, officials say

By **Samantha J. Gross** and **Matt Stout** Globe Staff, Updated November 9, 2023, 6:04 p.m.



A rally last month in front of the Massachusetts State House called for the Healey administration to uphold the right to shelter. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

The number of homeless families in Massachusetts' emergency shelter system hit a state-imposed limit Thursday, officials said, realizing a long-feared but expected development since Governor Maura Healey said the overburdened program was running out of space, personnel, and money amid a surge of migrants.

The number of families — 7,517 per [state data](#) — will trigger a recently installed cutoff at the system’s front door that advocates say will push parents, children, and pregnant people onto the street. The new limit of 7,500 families has also spurred a litany of unanswered questions about where homeless families, once guaranteed a roof over their heads under state law, will now go.

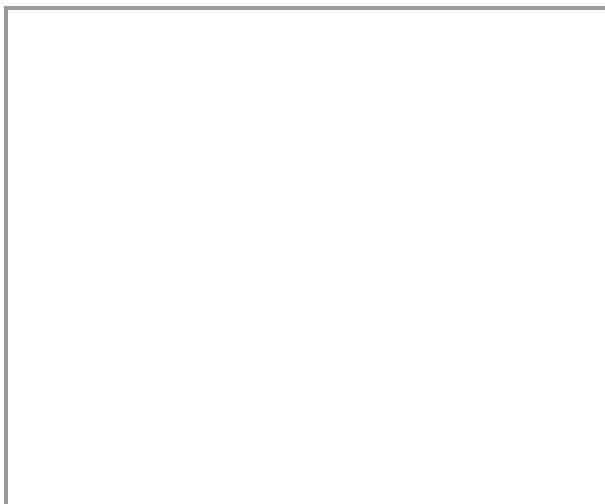
L. Scott Rice, whom Healey appointed last month as emergency assistance director, said in a statement Thursday that homeless families will continue to be placed into shelters “until the end of the day,” and starting Friday will be placed as “units become available.”

State officials intend to prioritize some families over others for shelter, and move those not placed to a newly created wait list.

“We are at the point where we do not have enough shelter units, service providers, or funding to continue to safely expand,” Rice said.

To some, it’s a nightmare come to life.

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“The timing is so stark,” said Laura Massie of Greater Boston Legal Services. “The weather has just gotten cold, and now is when we are imposing this cap and making families continue to stay in unsafe situations. . . . We are very concerned about the safety of these kids.”

For decades, homeless families have been guaranteed shelter under [a 1980s-era law](#) in Massachusetts, the only state with a so-called right-to-shelter requirement. But the current statute makes the mandate “subject to appropriation” — in other words, the state is required to follow it only as long as it has enough funding.

Healey framed her decision to limit the system as a painstaking yet necessary step to ease the burden on the emergency shelter system. State officials have been scrambling for months as the number of migrant and homeless families has surged.

The governor has said she’s [also considering limiting](#) how long homeless families can remain in shelters. Such a move would follow changes in New York City, where Mayor Eric Adams imposed a 60-day limit on families in shelters and a 30-day limit on single adults.

“At this point, it’s not just dollars . . . it’s also the case we need more personnel,” Healey said this week.

But advocates who work with homeless and migrant families said that the changes effectively leave many with no alternatives, and that any potential stopgap solutions are too small in scale to absorb the need.

Healey officials on Tuesday announced plans to seed the United Way of Massachusetts Bay with \$5 million, which it can spread to faith-based groups and other local organizations to stand up overnight shelters.

Democratic leaders in the House also offered their own proposal, passing a wide-ranging spending bill on Wednesday that would [commit \\$250 million](#) in new funding to help manage the surge of homeless and migrant families.

But the funding would come with several new requirements. Chief among them: House leaders specified that \$50 million must go toward creating a state-funded overflow site for those who land on the wait list. The House bill would also require that any overflow

sites must open within 30 days, and should the state not do so, the 7,500-family limit would be “revoked” until the sites are up.

But the bill still must clear the Senate, and it’s unclear if, or when, it could reach Healey’s desk.

In the interim, others were preparing for what Healey has called a new phase in the crisis. Ron Iverson, vice chair of obstetrics at Boston Medical Center, described the changes in a staff-wide email Friday as “a significant trauma and moral burden for all of our team members.” He offered mental health counseling to employees, many of whom [have long been caring for families](#) who show up at the hospital in need of shelter and medical attention.

Healey and her aides argue that the system has been pushed to its limits. At the current pace, state officials estimate, nearly 13,500 families could be in the shelter system by the end of June, which could cost the state as much as \$1.1 billion.

As of late October, officials said the state had spent \$115 million, more than one-third of its initial \$325 million emergency shelter budget. And, they say, if the state does not cap the number of families in the system — and it receives no other funding — they expect the [state to exhaust its current shelter budget](#) by Jan. 13.

Under new guidance from the Healey administration, families seeking shelter would be prioritized across [four separate groups](#), with those with children age 3 months or younger, relatives who are immunocompromised, or women with high-risk pregnancies at the front of the line.

Families with someone who has a tracheostomy tube, as well those deemed at “imminent” risk of danger from domestic violence, would also be considered a top priority for shelter.

Senator John C. Velis, who was [activated last month](#) by the National Guard to help in the state's response to the crisis, said policymakers should focus on ways to help connect migrant families with work opportunities as the state both prods [and works with](#) the federal government to connect immigrants with work permits.

Velis, a Westfield Democrat, estimated he visited 15 to 20 state-subsidized hotels housing migrant families, where “every single person” said they wanted the same thing.

“‘We want to work,’ ” he said they told him. “Our guiding north star [in making policy] should be: Does the action we’re taking make the individual more or less self-sufficient? . . . If the answer is no, then I think we need to have a real serious conversation about that and my recommendation would be that we not do it.”

Jeffrey Thielman, chief executive of the migrant aid nonprofit International Institute of New England, said that without more funding and more staff, groups like his won't be able to fill a void left by the state. More than 80 migrants had filled his waiting room before noon Monday, looking for housing and cash assistance.

He said all he's heard from the state are “very small-scale” measures such as calling on churches or other faith-based groups to temporarily house people in their facilities. The \$5 million grant proposal announced Tuesday will help, he said, but the “problem is larger and requires more support eventually.”

Healey, he said, also needs to more directly involve agencies such as his that have an expertise in finding newly arrived immigrants places to stay, particularly if the \$10 million the House proposed for resettlement agencies becomes law.

“There has to be dialogue,” Thielman said this week before the system reached 7,500 families. “The devil will be in the details.”

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