

# Some landlords have vacant apartments for homeless families. The paperwork required by the state is driving some away.

By [Samantha J. Gross](#) and [Mike Damiano](#) Globe Staff, Updated September 3, 2024, 12:33 p.m.



Frantz Joseph pulled paperwork from the state's Family Welcome Center outside the Immigrant Family Services Institute in Mattapan, which is providing assistance to migrants. ANDREW BURKE-STEVENSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

A key program Massachusetts uses to find long-term housing for homeless families is so backed up and laden with red tape that some applicants are missing out on vacant

apartments because landlords have gotten fed up with waiting and dropped out, several advocates told the Globe.

The state program, called [HomeBASE](#), pairs homeless families with landlords who have vacant units and then subsidizes rent and other expenses for up to three years. State officials consider it a crucial pressure release valve for the overburdened shelter system, which is [straining to accommodate](#) thousands of families as new migrant families continue to arrive.

[HomeBASE](#), however, was not built to accommodate the level of need that exists in Massachusetts, fueled in large part by the migrant crisis. Created in 2011, [HomeBASE was designed to help homeless families](#) transition out of emergency shelter and provide housing to those at imminent risk of eviction.

Now, with such a staggering influx of families seeking a place to live, the bureaucracy simply can't keep up. Landlords and advocates describe having to navigate a labyrinth of paperwork, with applications sometimes taking months to get processed. It's resulted in lost units as frustrated landlords decide that waiting for the paperwork to clear is not worth the forgone income, advocates say, though the exact number is uncertain.

It also leaves vulnerable families in limbo.

"Families are suffering because they don't have a place to go," said Geralde Gabeau, the executive director of the Immigrant Family Services Institute, which helps mostly Haitian migrants get connected to essential services.

Families show up at Gabeau's Mattapan office at all hours looking for a place to stay, she said. Her staff has been working overtime to help connect them with HomeBASE, But while eligible families and landlords line up their paperwork and ready themselves for move-in, the approval process sometimes jams up — the result, she said, of so many people trying to access the program.

In July, Governor Maura Healey's administration [announced plans to sharply limit stays](#) for families in the [overflow shelters](#), leaving migrant families four options: they can accept a [ticket to travel elsewhere](#), they can find a place on their own, such as with family or friends, they can find housing through the HomeBASE program, or, if all else fails, they'll be put out on the street.

The situation comes as Healey grapples with a system overflowing with more than 7,000 families and costing the state an [estimated \\$1 billion](#).

A spokesperson for the state's housing office, Kevin Connor, said in a statement that the Healey administration "will continue to work on improving the HomeBASE program to reduce the time that it takes to re-house families."

"Connecting families to stable housing is our ultimate goal," he added.

Advocates working on the front line of the migrant crisis consider HomeBASE to be the best of the available options.

"They are not on the street and they are in a safe place for at least two years," Gabeau said.

Increasing demand for the program, however, has translated into increasingly frequent delays for families, advocates say.

For years, groups such as Gabeau's have found landlords through Zillow, real estate databases, and homeowners' associations. These advocates have kept relationships with those property owners willing to be part of the program.

The Mattapan organization has at times had some HomeBASE applications fully processed within two weeks, but others have dragged on for as long as three months.

The program is helping many, with 384 families who were in shelters now placed in subsidized apartments since July 1, a significant increase from the same time frame last

year.

The Healey administration also beefed up HomeBASE, raising the subsidy families receive from \$20,000 to up to \$30,000 over two years with the possibility of a third year of help. And landlords who rent to a HomeBASE family get an additional one month's rent as a bonus.

Families contribute 30 percent of their income toward rent and the state pays the rest. Participating landlords generally receive market-rate rents for their units, similar to federal subsidized housing programs.

The state's housing office doesn't directly process HomeBASE applications, a spokesperson said. Instead, it contracts with 11 regional agencies across the state, which are responsible for meeting the demand for the program. A spokesperson said that since January, the average statewide wait time for a HomeBASE application is 12.6 days, but that average varies by agency.

One of those agencies, Metro Housing Boston, said in a statement that while it is behind in assigning case workers, it doesn't have a backlog of cases, and is hiring more staff to speed up processing times.

While HomeBASE has been more effective than the state's "reticketing program," which has given 51 families plane tickets to relocate out of the state, advocates say the steps involved — submitting paperwork to a sometimes backed-up system, pulling together the necessary identification for families to sign a lease, having a landlord go through an online portal — still move too slowly.

Jeff Thielman, who leads the International Institute of New England, said that while he is starting to see the strain easing on the shelter system, HomeBASE is still not moving fast enough. His group and other resettlement agencies have a [contract with the state](#) to move 400 families out of shelters by the end of the year.

So far, his organization has placed about 10 families in apartments since the contract started in March.

One Brazilian family — a mother and five children — was in a shelter in Roxbury for months while waiting for the HomeBASE paperwork to clear. They were desperate to move because the mother had been raped in a home where the family had previously stayed, said Fernanda Silveirao, their case worker with Fall River nonprofit Source Hub.

Ashley Ferreira, a longtime landlord and property manager in Fall River who owns the apartment the Brazilian family moved into, said the process involved “a lot of runaround” and proved “extremely complicated.”

“The lack of communication and lengthy process is definitely very discouraging,” said Ferreira.

Adam Hoole, a senior paralegal at Greater Boston Legal Services, who helped Silveirao navigate the case in Fall River, has been working with HomeBASE for years. He said the process isn’t straightforward, with copious paperwork requirements for landlords.

HomeBASE works for families who have the resources to move in and start their lives, he said. But it’s not a substitute for emergency shelter or, better, public housing.

“I don’t think it’s the magic solution [the state] thinks it is,” Hoole said. “It’s just a referral of the problem down the road.”

In the meantime, families wait.

The family from Brazil, for example, was matched with a different apartment in Fall River in mid-April, but that landlord pulled out three weeks into the process, feeling overburdened by the paperwork, according to Silveirao. The family stayed in Boston, on edge due to the trauma they had endured in their last living situation.

Silveirao matched them with Ferreira, who persisted with the process for more than a month — forgoing rent that would help with her mortgage payments — until the family could move in early June.

Silveirao said the experience was so daunting she never wants to deal with HomeBASE again.

“It was always more and more and more. Every week that went by, it was another piece of documentation or another certificate that [state officials] needed,” said Silveirao, who said she exchanged more than 80 emails during the process. “I know the caseload is huge, but [the process] makes it so much worse for the family that was involved.”

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