

NEWS &gt; POLITICS

# Families who claim eligibility for state-run shelter handed month-long benefits worth \$15K

Hundreds of families deemed ineligible in 2024 after placement into shelter system, Healey's office says



Nancy Lane/Boston Herald

Gov. Maura Healey proposed ending “presumptive eligibility” for placement into state-run shelters. (Nancy Lane/Boston Herald)



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Families seeking access to taxpayer-funded shelters who claim eligibility for benefits receive up to \$15,000 in services and housing during the month it takes state officials to determine whether they actually belong in the emergency assistance program, the Healey administration said.

Thousands of families have flooded the state's emergency assistance shelter program over the past year and a half, including migrants from other countries, but the Healey administration said state law bars them from verifying basic eligibility requirements prior to their initial placement.

Instead, top deputies for Gov. Maura Healey said they must approve up to one month of housing — or between \$10,000 to \$15,000 worth of services — for families “who appear to be eligible for shelter based on statements” they provide and any information the state has in its possession.

In a letter sent to a top House Democrat Monday, Housing Secretary Ed Augustus and Finance Secretary Matthew Gorzkowicz said half of all families who apply to the state-run shelter system are denied access based on their initial application.

But the two cabinet officials said the administration “conservatively” estimates that at least 6% of families — or hundreds out of the thousands in the system — are later “determined to be ineligible after being placed presumptively based on the initial information they provided.”

“Particularly in a time of heightened demand on the emergency assistance system, it is essential that shelter space be reserved for those who in fact qualify for benefits based on the eligibility criteria set by the Legislature,” the pair said in the letter.

A spokesperson for the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities said 3,939 “households” were presumptively placed into shelter in 2024 of which 228, or 6%, were ultimately deemed ineligible.

Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless Associate Director Kelly Turley said the letter made it sound like families were receiving shelter “on demand,” whereas the process requires applicants to produce a slew of documents.

Families may also not stay in shelter for the full month, she said.

“That period could be much shorter because the family provides the additional documentation that’s requested and proves that they’re eligible for ongoing benefits, or (the state’s housing agency) has information in their possession that shows the family is indeed ineligible,” Turley told the Herald.

The admission of how much the state is paying to house families during their initial month in the system came as Massachusetts House Democrats are weighing Healey’s \$425 million shelter spending bill and [policy proposals](#) to make the emergency assistance program more restrictive.

Healey called on House lawmakers to rewrite [her spending bill to include the new provisions](#), which would largely block arriving migrants from accessing state-run shelters, including by removing “presumptive eligibility” for families seeking access to emergency assistance benefits.

Gorzkowicz and Augustus said “presumptive eligibility” requires the state’s housing agency to place families into shelters based on self-attestations and prevents staff from authenticating information like a family’s identity or eligible immigration status prior to placement.

“We propose to return to the original intent of the right-to-shelter law by removing the ‘presumptive eligibility’ mandate from the line item and reverting to the prior practice of requiring pre-placement verification of eligibility for most families,” Gorzkowicz and Augustus said in the letter.

The change, the duo said, would reduce demand on the emergency assistance system by allowing state officials to make “necessary ineligibility determinations” before families are handed month-long benefits that cost taxpayers between \$10,000 to \$15,000.

Healey proposed waiving pre-placement verification on a “case-by-case basis” when a family “reasonably lacks” the necessary documentation to apply for shelter.

The governor said that could include families who are homeless because of a natural disaster or domestic violence.

Turley said “presumptively eligibility” is a critical tool that state officials can use to quickly provide homeless families with nowhere to go shelter and she called on lawmakers in the Massachusetts Legislature to reject Healey’s proposal to end the practice.

“We saw that families who were indeed ultimately eligible for shelter, that they were delayed in getting placed because they didn’t have all those documents up front,” Turley said. “Families often needed the stability of shelter to be able to gather that additional documentation.”

The letter from Gorzkowicz and Augustus also shed more light on Healey’s push to implement a residency requirement on the shelter system — a long-held Republican priority that Democrats have repeatedly shot down by claiming the policy would violate constitutional rights.

In past discussions between the Legislature and administration, Healey’s office was unclear if a residency requirement would pass constitutional scrutiny, according to House budget chief Rep. Aaron Michlewitz.

The two secretaries asked lawmakers to approve a requirement that would allow individuals to prove residency by showing one of 24 different documents like a state ID or email or letter from a school stating that a person was a current student within the last year.

Residency could also be proved by showing physical presence in Massachusetts for three months, tracked from the first day of “documentable presence in the state,” according to Gorzkowicz and Augustus.

“Applicants will have options to demonstrate residency and an individual who proved residency through documentation would not be required to show any period of physical presence,” the secretaries wrote in their letter.

Gorkowicz and Augustus did not make clear if the restrictive proposals on the emergency shelter system were intended to be temporary or permanent nor how much the state would save if they were implemented.

Those were key questions Michlewitz said the administration needed to answer in order for the House to advance Healey's shelter spending bill, which the governor has said is time-sensitive because cash to fund the emergency assistance program is expected to run out by Friday, give or take a week.

A spokesperson for the North End Democrat did not respond to a Herald inquiry sent Wednesday.

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2025 > January > 30