

Strict shelter rules for homeless families draw critics



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

Lindsey Collins, shown with her 2-year-old son, Julian, spent a night on a Quincy beach with her older child before she could find a temporary home.

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Another and her year-old son spent their nights shuttling between a hospital emergency room and South Station after a friend kicked them out. Another woman, eight months pregnant, huddled overnight on a Quincy beach with her 3-year-old.

Eventually, both families received spots in the state’s emergency shelter system, but only after proving they had stayed somewhere that posed a health or safety risk, such as a car or an unheated basement.

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Their predicaments were the result of tightened eligibility requirements that homeless advocates say are making the process of getting shelter more complex, even dangerous. Housing lawyers say they are overwhelmed with families who have been denied shelter since the regulations went into place a few years ago. Hospital emergency rooms report an increase in the number of people showing up with nowhere else to go.

“It’s just making it a more complicated process to get into shelter rather than reducing the number of families that are coming in or ensuring families are safe,” said Libby Hayes, executive director of Homes For Families, a Boston homeless advocacy group.

Massachusetts is the only state in the nation with a “right to shelter” law guaranteeing emergency housing for homeless families that qualify — and the only state with its own shelter system, which includes complexes with shared bathrooms and kitchens, apartments, and motel rooms. But as the number of people who can’t afford to keep a roof over their heads keeps increasing, those who work to find them housing worry that help isn’t coming quickly enough. Some even call the “right” to shelter a myth.

Lindsey Collins was eight months pregnant in the fall of 2012 when her mother told her to leave their home, forcing Collins and her young son to spend the night on a Quincy beach. When she applied for shelter the next day, the worker told her to return with a picture showing she had slept outside. Collins said she later produced a cellphone image of her son wrapped in blankets in the sand, but the worker again denied her assistance, saying she could have staged the photo.

“What if I stayed out that night and something really terrible happened? My kid could have gotten up and walked out into the street,” said Collins, 22, who was eventually placed in a series of motels, and said she was sexually assaulted in one of them. “It’s hard to be in position like that in general, never mind to be scolded for it.”

The Legislature redefined shelter eligibility requirements in 2012 in an attempt to better assess the needs and direct more resources into prevention and permanent housing. State reports show that since then, more than 2,000 families that might have been eligible under the old rules have been denied shelter annually.

The first qualification for residents seeking shelter is that their income must be less than 115 percent of the federal poverty level — or just under \$1,900 a month for a family of three. Those over the income limit are referred to shelters run by groups such as FamilyAid Boston, which reports demand has doubled in the past year.

Families now also have to show they are homeless for one of four reasons: domestic violence, natural disaster, no-fault eviction, or health and safety risks.

Most fall into the last — and most contentious — category, which includes families that have bounced around from place to place over a short period of time, and those staying somewhere unfit for habitation.

Homeless advocacy groups have tried in vain for several years to get an “imminent risk” category added to the eligibility rules, to keep families from becoming homeless before they are given a bed.

Sabine Jean-Louis, 23, found herself on the street in August 2013 after a friend made Jean-Louis and her 11-month-old son, Aiden, leave her Roxbury apartment. Jean-Louis had to quit her job as a Star Market produce clerk when her child care arrangement fell through, and she could no longer pay her friend rent. Jean-Louis said she had nowhere else to turn — her mother died when she was young and her father had his own money problems — but was denied emergency shelter, even though she had been sleeping in a park.

After that, she stayed in a short-term family shelter, her possessions loaded into a baby stroller, then started alternating between South Station and the Boston Medical Center emergency room’s waiting room — “just trying to keep Aiden safe.”

Finally, Jean-Louis contacted a poverty law center, which found a nonprofit that let her stay the night in its conference room. Armed with a letter from the nonprofit, she was placed in a Weymouth motel, almost two months after she first applied at the Dudley Square office of the Department of Community Housing and Development, which runs the shelter program.

Today, Jean-Louis has a full-time job at an insurance call center in Boston and her own subsidized apartment. But she remains traumatized by her experience.

“They treated me like I was garbage,” she said.

The state disputes that more people are being turned away, pointing out the monthly acceptance rate, about half, is roughly the same as it was before the new categories were added. Families are not required to prove that they are living in an unsafe situation before they are given a place to live, said Aaron Gornstein, who ran the Department of Housing and Community Development until he was replaced earlier this month by Governor Charlie Baker.

“We do everything possible to avoid that situation,” said Gornstein, noting the state has added 1,000 shelter beds in the past 18 months and recently started a program to immediately connect families seeking shelter with housing services.

“The focus should be on homeless prevention and more permanent affordable housing.”

Baker has said solving family homelessness is a top priority, but his administration declined to discuss shelter admission rules.

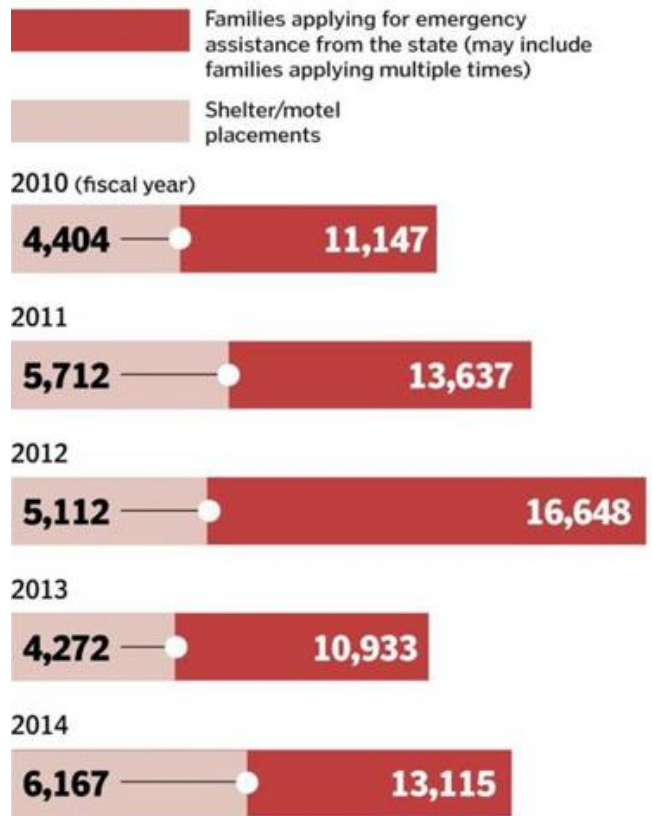
Some blame the disconnect between needs and eligibility rules on overzealous state workers. Others suggest advocates are advising families to sleep in their cars or in emergency rooms so they can get placement.

Regardless, the number of families in need of shelter is rising. In the fiscal year that ended in June 2013, just over 4,200 stayed in state-funded shelters and motels. In the last fiscal year, there were more than 6,100, the highest number ever.

Despite the strict guidelines for obtaining shelter, relatively few people live on the streets in Massachusetts.

Less than a tenth of one percent percent of homeless families — 12 people — were estimated to be without shelter during the annual one-night count conducted by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development last January. But the total number of

Seeking shelter



SOURCE: Department of Housing and Community Development

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homeless people increased 17 percent from 2013 to 2014, and has more than doubled since 2007 — the largest increase of any state.

As many as 15 families a month go to the pediatric emergency room at Boston Medical Center seeking a place to sleep — a rare occurrence a few years ago — and many reported they were sent there by state workers, said Megan Sandel, a pediatrician and researcher at the South End hospital. ER staff are required to assess each child who comes in, billing Medicaid for any tests or care provided, and families are given a room for the night, taking up valuable resources, Sandel said. They are discharged with a diagnosis of “homelessness,” which is their ticket to getting shelter.

Steve Valero, a lawyer who handles emergency shelter for Greater Boston Legal Services, said his department’s caseload of families has increased by about 50 percent since the eligibility rules were tightened. In one instance, he said, a mother and father were sleeping in a car while their child stayed with an aunt. An emergency shelter employee reportedly told them, “Just have the kid stay in the car one night and we’ll give you shelter.”

Ruth Bourquin, an attorney with the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, a poverty law center, said a client who had just come out of a six-month opiate addiction program in Northhampton was told by a state worker that she and her 10-month-old baby should stay on “seven different people’s couches for each of the next seven days” and then reapply.

Another client who was camping out in South Station after she was turned down for shelter went home with a man who offered her a place to stay, and was raped.

The rules are “barbaric,” Bourquin said.

Advocates maintain there is no need for such strict regulations. Shelters are a last resort, said Robyn Frost, executive director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, one of the nonprofits pushing for shelter reform.

“Most people aren’t going to drag their kids to an emergency room in the middle of the night if they have somewhere else to go,” she said.



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

Lindsey Collins, shown with her sons Kevin, 5, and Julian, 2, in their Quincy home, lived in a series of motels

Katie Johnston can be reached at katie.johnston@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@ktkjohnton](https://twitter.com/ktkjohnton).

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