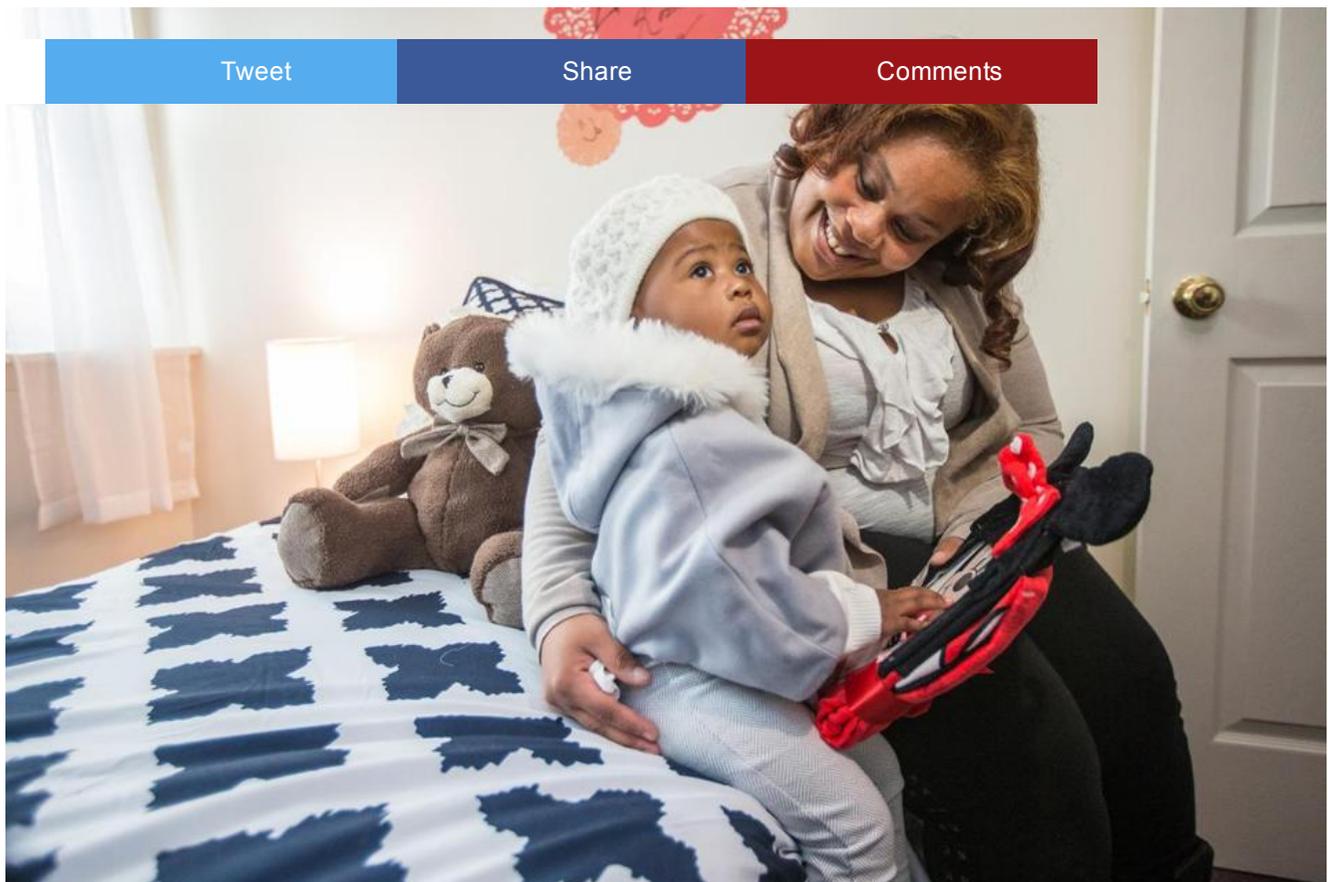


Baker outlines plan to address homelessness

Emphasizes permanent solution



ARAM BOGHOSIAN/BOSTON GLOBE

Celise Jackson and her daughter, Zoey, in their new home in Dorchester. Heading Home helped them find an apartment.

By **David Scharfenberg** | GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 26, 2014

Celise Jackson, homeless for months, crossed the threshold into her new apartment in the Bowdoin-Geneva section of Dorchester Tuesday and cried.

“Thank you so much,” she said, holding her 1-year-old daughter, Zoey, as tears streamed down her cheeks.

It was, at once, a very intimate moment and a very public one.

Jackson walked through the door not just with staff and volunteers from Heading Home, the advocacy group that got her into the apartment, but with Governor-elect Charlie Baker and a passel of aides, reporters, and photographers.

Baker, a Republican, has made tackling family homelessness a top priority for his first few months in office — combining empathy for people like Jackson with the sort of cost-efficient policy fixes that were the central promise of his campaign.

But if his approach is winning praise in some corners, it is also facing skepticism from some advocates who say management improvements will only go so far in an era of skyrocketing rents and growing economic inequality.

“It’s poverty,” said Robyn Frost, executive director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, arguing that a large-scale investment in affordable housing is required. “It’s driven by sheer, unadulterated, horrific poverty.”

The problem, whatever its origins, is sizable.

Massachusetts ranks third in the nation behind New York and California in the number of people in homeless families, according to a recent report by the federal government’s Department of Housing and Urban Development. (State officials and some advocates for the homeless dispute the findings, noting that Massachusetts’ strong reporting system may skew the rankings.)

As of Tuesday, there were about 4,800 homeless families in Massachusetts, according to state figures — 1,743 of them living in hotels and motels because there is no space in an overburdened shelter system.

Baker said his immediate priority will be getting families out of those hotels and motels, which are expensive for the state and take many homeless children miles from their schools. “Our first objective has to be to reduce that number down to zero, and then keep it there,” he said.

Ultimately, the governor-elect said, he wants to shift families into the sort of permanent housing Jackson took up on Tuesday.

Baker's approach is multipronged. He wants to send assessment teams into motels to develop tailored economic stabilization plans for each family; he is looking to provide aid for parents and kids who want to stay with extended family instead of in hotels; and he wants to empower local officials to develop regional approaches to the problem.

Philip Mangano, a nationally known figure who serves as president of the American Roundtable to Abolish Homelessness, was on hand Tuesday.



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Governor-elect Charlie Baker was on hand as Celise and Zoey Jackson moved in. Baker has a goal of getting all homeless families out of hotels.

He said advocates had learned what works — moving away from temporary shelter and toward permanent housing, providing supports for the formerly homeless once they are in housing — and that the trick is doing that work on a large scale.

Mangano, who served as the homeless czar for President George W. Bush, said Baker's management expertise was well suited to that challenge. "We need those business principles and practices put to work for the poorest citizens of the Commonwealth," he said.

Baker, who worked in the administrations of Republican governors William Weld and Paul Cellucci in the 1990s, said he's had success in this area before: noting that the Weld administration shrunk the homeless hotel and motel population to zero at one point.

But advocates and analysts say the landscape has shifted dramatically since then.

Rents have soared. And the recession has done long-term damage to low-income workers, they say, leaving them in part-time jobs with fewer state services to keep families afloat.

“These kids and parents can be made invisible,” said Donna Haig Friedman, director of the Center for Social Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston's McCormick Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies.

If the governor-elect wants to keep people out of homelessness, she said, he will have to reverse deep cuts in cash assistance, food assistance, and job training. Baker will also have to ameliorate the “cliff effect” that kicks in when a promotion or a better job cuts off a low-income mother or father from state supports, Friedman said.

She said Baker's call for an expanded, state-level earned income tax credit — a direct payment to low-income, working people — is a good start.

But the governor-elect, who has pledged to keep taxes low, does not seem primed to make broad new investments in the social supports that antipoverty activists advocate.

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David Scharfenberg can be reached at david.scharfenberg@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@dscharfGlobe](https://twitter.com/dscharfGlobe).

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