Advocates hope to ease eligibility for Massachusetts emergency homeless shelters

By Shira Schoenberg

3/22/2016 - Springfield- Guests of the Friends of the Homeless shelter in Springfield are able to express themselves artistically during Tuesday art classes taught by Springfield College graduate student Alicia Shibley. This is Stacey Pete. (Don Treeger / The Republican) (Treeger)
For a family in Massachusetts to get into an emergency shelter, in many cases they must first spend a night in a car, emergency room, bus station or another place "not meant for human habitation."

"It shocks me to say it out loud," said State Rep. Marjorie Decker, D-Cambridge. "This is no way for government to even think about dealing with homelessness."

Decker is the primary sponsor of a bill that would change the regulation, which today limits eligibility for emergency shelter to families who have already spent a night homeless.

There are other ways a family can enter a shelter -- for example, if they were a victim of domestic violence, were evicted or suffered a natural disaster. But for a family to qualify under a rule meant to prevent children from living in unsafe situations, they must have spent a night in an unsafe place.

Decker and other advocates for homeless families say the current policy is inhumane, since it forces families to spend a night in a car or emergency room before they can get into a shelter. Advocates are pushing for a bill, H.659, that would let families into state-funded shelters if they have no other feasible housing alternative, even if they have not spent a night in an unsafe place. The families would still have to meet all the other requirements, such as income eligibility.

"Families really suffer under this policy, putting children into unsafe conditions," said Kelly Turley, associate director at Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless.

The rule was put in place in 2012 under former Gov. Deval Patrick as a way to lower shelter costs. It has been kept in place by Gov. Charlie Baker.

A spokeswoman for the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development declined to take a position on the bill. "The administration will carefully review any legislation reaching the governor's desk," said Samantha Kaufman of the Department of Housing and Community Development.
In June, there were 60 families placed in shelter after spending a night in a place not fit for human habitation, according to the Department of Housing and Community Development. There were 604 families placed in shelter in the fiscal year that ended in June.

Turley estimates that it would cost the state an extra $100,000 to $300,000 a year to house these families before they spend a night in an unsafe place.

The administration could change the rule unilaterally, but Decker said she turned to the Legislature since neither of the last two administrations was willing to change it.

Asked for the administration’s position on the rule, Kaufman instead stressed the work the Baker administration has done preventing homelessness - reducing the number of people staying in hotels or motels from 1,500 to 45 since 2015 and working with families to meet their needs on a case-by-case basis, such as providing transportation arrangements and access to medical services.

There are currently 3,500 people in the state shelter system, a reduction of 23 percent since Baker took office, and the administration has reduced shelter caseloads by working with families before they become homeless to provide services like rental vouchers.

"Massachusetts is the only state in the nation that offers homeless children a right to shelter and the administration has worked collaboratively to re-house and re-shelter thousands of homeless children into more sustainable living situations based on the needs of their families," Kaufman said.

Previous attempts at getting a policy change inserted into the state budget have failed.

Liz Bewsee, housing and economic justice organizer for Arise for Social Justice in Springfield, said often families end up in cars or in a tent in a friend's backyard. She said security officers at the Springfield bus station may chase out homeless people,
while emergency rooms can threaten to call the Department of Children and Families.

"I heard one mother referring to going camping again with her 10-year-old daughter, after living in a car for a week and a half," Bewsee said.

The bill has 42 co-sponsors. The Joint Committee on Housing will hold a hearing on the bill Tuesday.