

State saw rapid decrease in homeless families in hotels

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By Brian Benson



Katrina and her girls all sleep in one bed at the Travelodge in Natick in 2015 since they had to use the rest of the room to keep their belongings

The pictures in an exhibit at Amazing Things Arts Center show aspects of everyday life families could experience in many neighborhoods.

People play baseball and dress up for Halloween and kids become friends with their peers who live nearby.

But, for homeless families who lived at the Travelodge in Natick, a parking lot was their ball field, beds were shared and cooking was done in makeshift, crude kitchens.

"It's a motel," said Belinda

Soncini, a Boston photographer who documented the life of homeless families living in the motel. "It's never home."

Her exhibit comes as state officials have worked in recent years to reduce the number of homeless families living in hotels and motels, which have been used to house families when shelters that are part of the state's [Emergency Assistance program](#) fill up. The number of families living in motels or hotels has dropped statewide from about 2,000 in the summer of 2014 to only 86 as of Feb. 1. The overall number of families who are part of the Emergency Assistance program has dropped from about 4,800 to about 3,500 from late 2014 to February 2017, according to state data.

Massachusetts families must meet certain eligibility requirements for the program related to income, having children or being pregnant and how they became homeless, according to a state website.

In MetroWest, four families lived in hotels in Marlborough, 49 in Natick and 11 in Northborough as of mid-January 2015. By mid-September 2015, there were no homeless families living in

Marlborough. Natick reached zero by mid-December 2015. All homeless families had left Northborough hotels or motels by mid-September 2016.

That is good financial news for school districts that faced increased costs to transport and serve homeless children. But, some advocates for the homeless have questioned whether the state is meeting its legal obligations to shelter homeless families.

"The governor has repeatedly said that homelessness is a human tragedy, and that sheltering homeless families in motel rooms is the most disruptive, and least effective, way of meeting this tragedy. The administration is proud of its record re-housing and re-sheltering thousands of homeless children, reducing the number of families sheltered in motel rooms from 1,500, to under 160," Paul McMorrow, director of policy and communications for the Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development, said in a statement. "Motel rooms are not meant for long-term occupancy, and they lack the basic necessities, such as kitchens with stoves, and living space, that children need to live healthy, fulfilling lives."

The state has worked to reduce the number of families living in motels and in need of homeless shelter through several initiatives, including working to identify at-risk families before they come to a shelter intake office and helping prevent them from becoming homeless. State officials have also sought to help people financially be able to afford housing and increase the amount of affordable housing.

Is the state doing enough to house homeless families?

Laura Massie agrees that hotels and motels are not ideal placements for families, but officials also have to consider what alternatives are available. They are preferable to receiving no shelter and may also be preferable to other forms of shelter that are farther away from families' home communities, she said.

Being placed far from home disrupts children's education and interferes with relationships families have built with doctors and other service providers, said Massie, a Greater Boston Legal Services staff attorney.



On a hot summer day, the parking lot at the Travelodge in Natick in 2015 becomes a baseball field

"In many cases, families feel yanked from their home (community)," she said.

Non-motel shelters include congregate housing where families have private bedrooms, but share other spaces such as bathrooms. There are also scattered sites that are similar to apartments.

Massie questions whether the state Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) is adequately serving families who are homeless, including those with disabilities. The state, she said, has not provided adequate non-hotel placements for homeless families to keep families close to their home communities.

Massie is working on a lawsuit filed by several homeless people against DHCD claiming the agency has violated requirements for housing homeless families. The suit claims in part that the department has not provided or delayed providing shelter to some families. It also claims the department has placed some families too far from their home communities and hasn't



Shykeyla's daughter goes for a walk at the Travelodge in Natick in 2015

adequately accommodated the needs of some people with disabilities.

Massie worries the state is not providing shelter to some people who appear to be eligible, but have not fully submitted all documents.

The state has generally denied allegations in the suit. DHCD will place families into the program pending full confirmation of their eligibility and has retrained staff in eligibility standards.

"Massachusetts is the only state in the nation that offers homeless children a right to shelter, and DHCD has consistently upheld that right, and acted in compliance with the law, while substantially reducing the state's reliance on motel shelters," McMorrow said in the statement. "We look forward to vigorously defending the department in this matter."

Efforts in MetroWest and the Milford area

At Framingham-based South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC), staff focus on making sure shelter units turn over quickly when someone moves out. Workers also focus on completing repairs to offline units, said Linda Glatt Anderson, SMOC's director of family emergency services.

There has "been a big push statewide to be much more efficient in our use of shelter units," said Glatt Anderson.

SMOC generally provides shelter to about 185 to 188 homeless families through the Emergency Assistance program on any given day, making use of virtually all of the space it has available for the program, Glatt Anderson said.

SMOC helps families staying in shelters with finding jobs and permanent housing, learning financial literacy skills such as budgeting and meeting other needs, she said.

"Kids need to be in houses and need a safe place to be," she said. "Our ultimate goal is to get people into their own homes."

A rising minimum wage in the state will likely help the homeless, but ultimately Massachusetts needs more affordable housing, Glatt Anderson said.

In Milford, the Daily Bread Food Pantry provides food to homeless people living in shelters or even outdoors.

"It's a sad situation," said John DeAngelo, the pantry's president.