

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
February 7, 2025

Contact: Nolan King
Nolan.King@mahouse.gov

House Passes Right-to-Shelter Reform

Reforms Include Qualification Restrictions and Benefit Limitations

Boston, MA - Representative Jonathan Zlotnik (D-Gardner) joined his colleagues in voting to pass a bill to reform the state run homeless shelter system and fund the program for FY2025. The Right-to-Shelter law in Massachusetts was put in place in 1983 and has not had significant changes or reforms in the four decades that the law and the program created by the law have operated. The bill passed (126-26) and now moves the Senate for debate.

“This law, and the system it created is in need of serious reform and cost containment. The way it has been done is not sustainable,” **stated Rep Zlotnik**. “I have voted against previous funding bills for this program because I felt more reform was needed. While this bill is not perfect it is a significant step forward, especially in the area of cost containment,” he added.

An important cost containment measure included, requires funds used for the Emergency Assistance program to be subject to a competitive bidding process. “Because this was being done on an ‘emergency’ basis, the normal process was not followed, and this clearly led to ballooning costs,” Zlotnik added. “Quite frankly, I don’t think the program has worked well for a long time, it was the subject of a lot of attention and effort by Charlie Baker during his first term and the recent influx exacerbated those underlying problems in recent years. But this is the first time in 40 years that the law will actually be changed to reign in costs.”

Currently, applicants are presumed to be eligible under the law, and the Healey-Driscoll Administration waits 30 days after benefits have started to verify each applicant’s eligibility. Following the Administration’s recommendations, this bill would allow them to verify eligibility during the application process by requiring applicants to prove Massachusetts residency and an intent to stay in Massachusetts by providing certain documentation. The Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (HLC) may offer a case-specific waiver for exigent circumstances and must put out regulations or guidance for doing so, which must require waivers for families with a child under the age of 6, a person with a disability, a qualified veteran, or someone experiencing an imminent threat of domestic violence.

The bill gives the HLC the authority to require benefits to be provided only to families who are residents of Massachusetts and who are United States citizens; persons lawfully admitted for permanent residence; or otherwise permanently residing under the color of law in the U.S.

The bill gives HLC the authority to require families whose income exceeds 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) for three consecutive months to be deemed no longer eligible for

the EA program. The bill also reduces the maximum length in an EA shelter from nine to six consecutive months and removes the availability of two 90-day extensions for individuals meeting certain criteria. The bill does maintain the availability of extensions if there is a hardship that is certified by the Secretary of HLC.

The bill removes the 150 families cap on the number of families that HLC may terminate from the emergency housing assistance program in any week due to durational limits. The bill also caps the total capacity of the EA system at 4,000 families between December 31, 2025 and December 31, 2026. As of Thursday, February 6, there were 5,894 families currently enrolled in the EA program, according to the Healey-Driscoll Administration.

The bill requires each individual adult applicant or beneficiary for emergency housing assistance benefits to disclose all prior criminal convictions in Massachusetts and any other jurisdiction, while exempting from disclosure prior convictions that have been sealed or expunged. It also requires CORI and SORI checks for each individual adult applicant or beneficiary prior to placement in the emergency housing assistance program.

The bill requires HLC to permanently require each adult applicant or beneficiary that joins the family to provide notice, and HLC must review all information necessary to verify the individual's eligibility for the program. If there's a failure to report the necessary information for complete verification, the applicant or beneficiary will no longer be eligible for benefits and existing benefits will be terminated.

The passage of the bill comes on the heels of the announcement that the shelter that has operated in the Super 8 hotel in Gardner will be closing in the coming months as the program is scaled back.

###