

Proposed Regulation Changes Emergency Assistance Program

What is Emergency Assistance?

Homelessness is a problem that affects many families across the Commonwealth. To assist homeless families, the Emergency Assistance Program (EA) provides shelter and support services to families across the Commonwealth. The Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) currently administers the EA Program.

Why change the regulations?

The Commonwealth is required to provide shelter to all families who meet the eligibility criteria. The EA caseload has increased steadily since FY 05. At the beginning of FY 05, the number of families in EA shelter was 1,147. Today, it is almost 2,600.

Several steps have been taken to manage the current crisis in family homelessness:

- DTA recently completed a re-procurement of the emergency shelter system to focus on the rapid re-housing of homeless families.
- The Patrick Administration filed legislation to transfer the EA Program, individual shelters, and the Home and Healthy for Good program to the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). Combining housing and shelter will create a single point of entry, assessment, and access to housing solutions for individuals and families who are already homeless or who are at-risk of losing their housing.

Due to escalating caseloads, the funds in the EA account (4403-2120) are insufficient to meet projected expenses: therefore, eligibility changes are necessary to continue to manage the crisis in family homelessness.

In developing the proposed regulatory changes, feedback was considered from a variety of stakeholders including shelter and housing assistance providers, local housing authorities, advocacy groups and legal services providers. As a result, the changes focus on maintaining benefits for families having the greatest difficulty meeting their basic needs while encouraging self-sufficiency through motivation and incentives.

What are the proposed changes?

- Ending eligibility if the client refuses the first offer of safe and reasonable housing.
- Requiring all families to participate in a self-sufficiency plan (in which each adult would be

required to participate in a work, education or training activity for 30 hours per week unless there is a good cause reason for not doing so) and save 30% of their total income. By having homeless families participate in a work, education or training activity and save their income (while having no rental expenses), they will be better prepared to move quickly into sustainable, permanent housing.

- Denying shelter for anyone who has an outstanding arrest or default warrant and does not resolve it within 30 days of entering shelter.
- Reducing the period for extended eligibility when families become over-income from six months to three months.
- Defining the “abandonment” of emergency shelter as any failure to stay at the placement for two consecutive nights without prior notification or good cause (e.g., emergency hospitalization).
- Changing the maximum age of an eligible “child” to 18 when s/he is the only child in the household. Offspring are exempt if they are 19 or younger and attending school or 20 or younger and disabled.
- Denying households that are evicted or leave public or subsidized housing without good cause.

These changes are part of a comprehensive response to provide housing and stabilization services to homeless families. The transfer of the homeless programs to DHCD, along with the reprocurement of the family shelter system, will provide a framework to more effectively rapidly re-house families. These three initiatives will ensure that the Administration, providers and clients have a shared responsibility in ending homelessness in the Commonwealth.

In addition, DTA is in the process of working with the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) to re-procure its Employment Services Program (ESP). This will allow the Department to prioritize employment and training resources for clients with the greatest barriers, including homeless cash assistance recipients.

The proposed changes were filed with the Legislature on January 28, 2009.