

Massachusetts homeless families study concludes long hotel stays harmful to people, costly to state

By [Nancy Gonter, The Republican](#)

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The Republican / [Dave Roback](#) Jada McKenzie Gamlin, 5, shares a story with her mom, Nichole Gamlin in the living room of the Prospect House in Springfield.

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SPRINGFIELD - An in-depth study of how Massachusetts handles [homeless families](#) concludes there are better ways to keep the families from long stays in hotels, which are harmful to the people and costly to the state.

“No one in the state, no one in the [Legislature](#) and no one in this city likes motels. Everybody believes these dollars could be used differently. The dilemma is, first we have to get out of the

hotel business,” said Susanne Beaton, director of special initiatives for the Paul and Phyllis Fireman Charitable Foundation, which sponsored the study.

Senior staff of the Fireman foundation and providers of services to homeless families gathered Thursday at a shelter at 103 Prospect St. to discuss its recommendations.

Done by University of Pennsylvania Professor Dennis P. Culhane and his research assistant Thomas Byrne, the study proposes a series of steps to keep families from becoming homeless and making sure those who do become homeless find new homes quickly.

The issue of homeless families has been in the spotlight recently with several incidents, including one Monday in which [Matthew Brace, 24, is accused of offering to exchange his baby daughter for either beer or cocaine](#). They were living in a state-paid motel room in Chicopee.



The Republican / Dave RobackSusanne Beaton, director of special initiatives for the Paul and Phyllis Fireman Charitable Foundation, listens to Brittany Walker as she talks about the Prospect House. She is holding her daughter, Briannah Walker, 2.

Peter Gagliardi, director of HAPHousing Inc., the agency that runs the nine-family shelter on Prospect Street and works with families in motels to get them into apartments, said the study shows that the pilot programs in place do work.

“I would say this study crystallized our understanding of the change that is needed,” Gagliardi said.

Since Massachusetts moved provision of services to the homeless to the state Department of Housing and Community Development, the number of homeless shelter spaces has been reduced. Also, more money, such as rental assistance, has been directed at preventing homelessness and at getting people out of shelters and hotels and into apartments.

Two women who are living in the Prospect Street shelter spoke about what it has been like to be in the shelter and how much having their own apartment will mean to them.

Nichole Gamelin, who stayed several months in a Chicopee motel with her 5-year-old daughter before coming to the shelter on Jan. 5, said she will soon have her own apartment in Agawam. And, she is beginning training in medical coding, she said.

At the hotel, no one helped her, she said. Since she has been in the shelter, she has gotten lots of help, including guidance on how to become self-sufficient, she said.

“I’m excited but I’m nervous. I’m always saying I want to leave. It’s hard being cooped up with nine families, but it’s worth it,” Gamelin said.

Brittany R. Walker, who has been in the shelter since Sept. 20 with her three children ages 9 months to 3 years, heard Thursday that an apartment may have been found for her. She’s also starting training in customer service next week, although she hopes to study culinary arts.

After bouncing from shelter to shelter and temporarily losing custody of her children, Walker said she has now learned to be independent. Walker, 20, said is ready for the first home she will call her own.

“It’s scary but exciting at the same time. I think we’re going to enjoy it a lot,” Walker said.

The study, “Ending Family Homelessness in Massachusetts: A New Approach for the Emergency Assistance Program,” says that nearly 5,000 families, including 10,000 children, experience homelessness each year.

The state last year spent an average of \$2.3 million a month on hotel stays, according to the study.

The study concludes that the state is well-positioned to transform its system because of its health reform legislation; because 10 regional networks are working on the issue of homelessness, and because the transition to a system with fewer shelter units and more prevention and “rapid re-housing” has already begun.

The entire study can be found at: www.ppfound.org/documents/whitepaper.pdf.

Some of the study’s recommendations include:

- The state Department of Housing and Community Development, which oversees emergency housing assistance, should have more flexible eligibility criteria.
- Families should be required to participate in self-sufficiency planning to be eligible for service.
- Different levels of service, including shelter, relocation grants and flexible assistance, should be provided depending on each family’s need.
- Families should be provided with a shelter “exit plan” within a certain time.

