

Massachusetts Senate bill shifts \$863 million from state savings account to shelter system

By Sam Drysdale

State House News Service

Lawmakers started negotiations Monday on a bill that's expected to eventually inject hundreds of millions more dollars into the state's family shelter system and put time limits on how long homeless families can stay in the system.

Ways and Means Chairs Rep. Aaron Michlewitz and Sen. Michael Rodrigues will lead the negotiations, as they also both work on their budgets for the upcoming fiscal year.

Michlewitz, Rodrigues and conferees Reps. Ann-Margaret Ferrante and Todd Smola and Sens. Cynthia Friedman and Patrick O'Connor held their negotiations open to the public for about two minutes Monday, before voting to go into executive session and closing the discussions to outsiders.

In opening statements both chairs emphasized the urgency of the negotiations.

"I look forward to working with all of you to get this rectified as quickly as possible. You and I are experienced at it," Rodrigues said to Michlewitz. "So I'm sure we will accomplish that goal quickly."

The House version of the fiscal 2024 spending bill (H 4466 / S 2711) directs \$245 million towards the shelter system, while the Senate bill would authorize the Healey administration to pull from an \$863 million state savings account called the

transitional escrow fund across both fiscal 2024 and 2025.

State officials estimate that funds already appropriated for the shelter system will run out sometime this spring.

The Senate bill also calls for making permanent pandemic-era provisions allowing expanded outdoor dining and a graduate student nursing program, but in a contrast from the House, it would not allow restaurants to continue selling alcoholic beverages to go – a pandemic-era policy that expired at the end of March since lawmakers failed to renew it before then.

“I’m looking forward to working with you, and all of you, on this supplemental budget bill trying to get it done as quickly as possible. We have some obviously important pieces in there that are of immediate need. And I know we share a desire to see this get to the governor’s desk as soon as we can,” Michlewitz said.

Much of the debate will revolve around the use of reserve funds, which have grown since an influx of federal dollars during the pandemic and state budget surpluses allowed lawmakers to tuck away historic amounts.

Both House and Senate bills also look to cap how long a family can stay in shelter – a departure from the state’s 40-year-old policy that qualifying homeless families can stay in state-run housing for as long as it takes to get on their feet.

Representatives and senators are looking to restrict stays to nine months. The Senate would allow officials to award one or more 90-day extensions to shelter residents who meet criteria, such as single parents of children with disabilities or those who need an extension to avoid losing a job. The House would offer three-month extensions to those who are employed or enrolled in a job training program, pregnant women, people with certain disabilities, veterans and those facing domestic violence risks.