

Massachusetts Senate Budget Funds Free Community College For All

By Alison Kuznitz, Sam Drysdale
State House News Service

Senate Democrats on Monday unveiled plans to make community college free for all students in Massachusetts, starting in the fall semester of 2024.

The “MassEducate” plan, which will be part of the Senate’s fiscal 2025 budget to be fully unveiled on Tuesday, would invest \$75.5 million to cover tuition and fees for all residents, and offer a stipend to some students of up to \$1,200 for books, supplies and other costs.

The Senate budget will also recommend continuing fiscal 2024 higher education investments, such as \$18 million in free nursing programs at community colleges and \$24 million that the state is currently investing in free community college for residents over 25. In total, the forthcoming budget invests \$117.5 million to make community college free for all.

“I’m thrilled that we have taken access to higher education to the next level, as this initiative will bolster our educated workforce and lay the foundation for generations to come,” Senate Ways and Means Chair Michael Rodrigues said in a statement. “Tuition free community college impacts individuals most in need and whom otherwise would not be afforded this opportunity. It will greatly help to keep our workforce graduates stand ready to meet the challenges of a global economy.”

Rodrigues called the plan affordable, sustainable and equitable.

Free community college would be funded with surtax money, a spokesperson for Senate President Karen Spilka said, and the state just experienced a jolt in tax collections in April that beat projections by more than \$1 billion. The bulk of the overage comes from capital gains tax and surtax revenues, a potentially promising sign for education investments linked to the surtax.

Senators did not attach any income restrictions to the plan to make tuition and fees cost-free, though the \$1,200 book stipends will only be available for students who make, or whose families earn, 125 percent or less of the state's median income.

Spilka's office said community colleges attract a different demographic than four-year colleges in the commonwealth, including more diversity in age and minority backgrounds.

"We know if we want a generation of students to benefit from the terrific programs at our many community colleges across our state, we must remove the barriers to entry – as many or all of them, if possible," Spilka said Monday morning at Middlesex Community College in Lowell.

Executive director of the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges Nate Mackinnon, who supports the proposal, previously said making community college free for all is a simple message, and one that would lead to higher enrollment across income brackets. Spilka offered a similar argument on Monday.

"I think you would all agree that free is a lot easier to understand than, 'It will be free if there is the time, support of adults, (and) language capabilities needed to fill out these many complicated forms,'" Spilka said. "Making it simply free will break down the barrier that exists. That is why our plan will cover tuition and fees of every community college student in Massachusetts."

When the Senate president first rolled out the idea in January, reporters asked if the promise of free community college would divert students who otherwise would have gone to four-year institutions to community colleges instead.

"I think in the long term this is going to absolutely be a benefit to the four-year institutions, both state universities and UMass, I think because of that transfer factor," replied Mount Wachusett Community College President James Vander Hooven, who was also at Monday's press conference.

He continued, "We're already seeing a significant increase in students over 25 whose other alternative was to not go to college at all. So there's a pipeline. I'll just speak for myself, the relationship that we have with Fitchburg State at Mount Wachusett Community College – we're at the table all of the time, putting together these transfer pathways for students between community college and state university."

In Lowell on Monday, Francesca Purcell, a senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, said that similar free community college programs in Oregon, Tennessee and Texas initially diverted a "small percentage" of students away from four-year institutions. Still, Purcell said the programs also cause a "larger percentage of students who would not have otherwise considered attending to actually go to college for the first time."

"Our 15 community colleges educate the highest percentage of low-income students in our state's public higher education system, while students who are fortunate enough to come from wealthy families are already mostly going to four-year colleges and universities," she said. "I don't believe there'll be a significant amount of students from wealthy families opting to attend community colleges, but even if some do, the big goal here is to make sure that we are increasing college access and completion, especially for students from low-income backgrounds."

Senate Democrats' higher education proposal marks a departure from the House budget, which allocates \$24 million for MassReconnect but does not fund universal free community college. Gov. Maura Healey had also recommended funding MassReconnect at \$24 million, a \$4 million increase over the current fiscal year for the nascent program.

The funding discrepancy is likely to be hashed out in closed-door budget negotiations this summer, as lawmakers determine the best way to deploy \$1.3 billion in surtax revenues on education and transportation investments. A spokesperson for House Speaker Ron Mariano, asked whether the House is open to considering the Senate's community college pitch, told the News Service, "We'll review."

Spilka signaled her branch's approach could be a boon for growing the state's workforce and preventing residents from leaving Massachusetts.

"By partnering with businesses, community college provides the kinds of hands-on, real-world training that creates the workforce that we so desperately need," Spilka said. "We will be opening the floodgates to employers who are starved for a skilled workforce so Massachusetts keeps the competitive edge that we so very much pride ourselves in. It will help us train the next generation of health care workers, personal care attendants, lab technicians, clean tech workers, early educators and so many others."

The Senate recommends installing annual caps on tuition increases at community colleges, set to an inflation index, with the goal of ensuring "the long-term fiscal sustainability" of MassEducate, Spilka's office said. Lawmakers also want to create a working group tasked with overhauling how funding is awarded to community colleges based on their performance; direct the the Department of Higher Education to improve the process for transferring credits from community colleges to four-year colleges; and establish a

commission to analyze financial aid offered to individuals attending state universities and the UMass system.

The Senate's proposal could help grow an existing transfer program between community colleges and four-year institutions, said Rob McCarron, CEO of the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in Massachusetts.

"Nearly two-dozen independent colleges and universities in Massachusetts work with community colleges to provide a seamless and affordable transition to a four-year degree under the Transfer Guarantee Program," McCarron said in a statement to the News Service. "However, as these students graduate from community college and wish to continue their studies at a four-year institution, it's absolutely critical that the state supports their choice to find the school – whether public or private – that best fits their talents, interests and learning styles, and ensure that state financial aid can go with them."

UMass spokespeople did not immediately respond to News Service questions about the Senate's plan, including whether university officials are concerned about any enrollment impacts across the UMass system.

For months, senators have weighed different models to provide free community college, including a \$170 million approach favored by the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges to steer more funding to low-income students.

Paul Craney, spokesperson for the conservative leaning research group Massachusetts Fiscal Alliance, told the News Service he cautioned against the investment.

"There is nothing as expensive as making something free," he said. "The cost will inevitably balloon and the taxpayers will forever be obligated to pay for this irresponsible decision. There is nothing more irresponsible than a politician making something 'free' and implying to people that someone else will pay for it. Everyone should have some skin in the game. The

Senate would be irresponsible to pursue this.”

Beyond MassEducate, Senate budget-writers are proposing \$10 million for a new “Student Persistence Fund,” which would flow to community colleges and state universities as they help support low-income students who face obstacles in completing their degrees. The money could cover costs tied to transportation, child care and food insecurity.

Senators also want to invest \$18.3 million in wraparound services for community college students, and increase investment in grants for students who opt directly into four-year colleges, called MASSGrant Plus.

The MASSGrant Plus program, which is meant to cover unmet costs of tuition and mandatory fees for low-income community college students across Massachusetts’ public higher education institutions, was expanded to an \$84 million investment last year. Healey’s administration said a third of all University of Massachusetts students qualify for free tuition with the grant expansion approved last year.

The House sought to maintain that \$80 million additional investment, while the Senate Ways and Means plan would inject an \$21 million into the MASSGrant Plus grants.

**All Five New Bedford Area
State Reps Vote Against
Giving Homeless Veterans**

Preference For Housing in Massachusetts

All five New Bedford State Reps, Tony Cabral, Christopher Hendricks, Christopher Markey, Paul Schmid, and William Straus voted against an amendment that would give homeless veterans preference for housing over others to include non-US citizen migrants. Served your country and paid taxes? You don't get any benefit over someone who paid no taxes and traveled through 5 countries and dozens of states breaking immigration laws to get to Massachusetts.

On Friday, **Massachusetts Democrats shut down several Republican amendments that would have prioritized Massachusetts residents over newly arrived migrants.** The vote was on party lines with the vast majority of Democrats voting against it and all Republicans voting for it.

For 10+ years four of the New Bedford area State Reps have blocked bills giving veterans preference in housing. **In 2013, Rep. Diehl offered an amendment "requiring veterans be given priority over illegal immigrants for public housing."** Tony Cabral, Christopher Hendricks, Christopher Markey, Paul Schmid, and William Straus all voted against the amendment even getting a vote on the floor. Chris Hendricks wasn't in office in 2013. I haven't had a chance to review all their votes between 2013 and 2024, but we have at least two examples of them voting against amendments like this.

We asked our **52,000 members in our Fall River group if veterans should have priority in housing, and 99% of them stated yes.** 1,205 people voted, 1,185 answered yes, 20 voted no. **All four Somerset and Fall River State Reps, Alan Silvia, Carole Fiala, Patricia Haddad, and Paul Schmid, voted against an amendment that would give homeless veterans preference for housing.**

Top ten countries where most migrants arriving to Massachusetts come from

During the Trump administration the annual cap of refugees that could be admitted into the country was lowered to 15,000. When President Biden came into office he raised that number to 125,000. In 2021 12,500 refugees arrived to U.S. and the following year, that number doubled. In 2023, the number exploded to 60,000 and in 2024 that number has increased exponentially surpassing the previous year's numbers only months into the new year.

This year the nations with the most refugees coming to our shores starting with the most, hailed from the Congo, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Syria, and Venezuela. Which states received the most refugees in 2024?

- #01. Texas
- #02. California
- #03. New York
- #04. Pennsylvania
- #05. Florida

Data compiled from the Refugee Processing Center reveals the top ten nations where migrants arriving to Massachusetts, hail from.

- #01. Congo
- #02. Afghanistan
- #03. Burundi
- #04. Central African Republic
- #05. Eritrea

- #06. Myanmar
 - #07. Syria
 - #08. Guatemala
 - #09. Sudan
 - #10. Kazakhstan
-

Massachusetts Shelter Bill Negotiators Have Final Deal

By Sam Doran
State House News Service

Top Democrats expect to file a compromise Wednesday on a bill (H 4582) designed to continue funding the state's overrun emergency family shelter and implement reforms to cut costs by limiting how long families may stay in shelters.

As the News Service first reported, lawmakers working on a fiscal 2024 supplemental budget (H 4466 / S 2711) picked up the paperwork needed to file a deal Wednesday morning.

In a joint statement Wednesday afternoon, lead conferees Sen. Michael Rodrigues and Rep. Aaron Michlewitz said they were finalizing details of the compromise in order to "timely" file the new language "for the House and Senate to consider the report tomorrow."

Both branches will be holding formal sessions Thursday. Under the Joint Rules, a conference report would need to be filed by 8 p.m. Wednesday in order for the branches to take it up anytime after 1 p.m. Thursday.

"I'm not going to get into specifics, but I think you heard

that they picked up a jacket. Usually that's a good signal. And I think a deal will be done in short order," Senate President Karen Spilka told the News Service in the afternoon.

Known as a conference jacket, the blank form is used to gather signatures from House and Senate negotiators to finalize a deal. Retrieving an unsigned jacket from the clerk's office usually indicates that a six-person negotiating committee is close to final agreement.

Rep. Paul Donato of Medford, chair of the Second Division, said he believed a supp deal was on the radar for this week.

"I mean, we're here, and we're going to be here for a while. Time to do the supp budget and get it out of the way," Donato said during a recess in the House's first budget debate session of the week.

The six-person committee, chaired by Michlewitz and Rodrigues, held its first meeting April 1 after the branches passed competing versions of the bill in March.

In its version, the Senate proposed making an \$863 million state escrow fund available to fund family shelters through next fiscal year. The House proposed using \$245 million from escrow savings to cover the shelters until the current fiscal year ends this summer. The bills take different approaches to proposed limits on how long families can remain in the emergency shelters. Also tied up in the conference talks are provisions related to streamlined licensing for outdoor dining at restaurants and the authorization for restaurants to sell alcoholic beverages to go.

Current appropriations for the shelter system are expected to run out "sometime mid- to end of April," Rodrigues said this month, adding that the Healey administration has "other flexible funds that they can use."

Sen. Patrick O'Connor of Weymouth, one of two Republicans on

the conference committee, told the News Service that he learned details of a House-Senate compromise Tuesday and decided to withhold his signature from the jacket.

“You know, we’re in tough financial times, and this is a large amount of money that the state’s been spending on this, and will continue to spend on this. And I would like to see more actionable plans put in place to see where the end-game is here,” he said.

O’Connor said he wants to see state officials “be louder” in calls for assistance to the federal government and the state’s delegation on Capitol Hill.

“We do not have the financial resources to do it alone,” O’Connor said. “And until we have a long-term plan in place, I cannot support the continued spending of this much of our state resources.”

City of New Bedford creates new position to facilitate innovation and improvement

‘Chief of Innovation and Policy Development’ Will Drive Technology and Policy Improvements for Better Municipal Services.

The City of New Bedford is creating a new position that will drive innovation and reforms across City government. The Chief of Innovation and Policy Development will be a senior-level position in City government that will identify and implement new technology and policies to improve the quality,

efficiency, and cost-effectiveness of municipal services.

“Our residents deserve a City government that solves problems and delivers results,” Mayor Jon Mitchell said. “We can do more for them with the right tools, including proven technologies and up-to-date policies. The world is changing quickly, and the City of New Bedford won’t be left trailing behind.”

The Chief of Innovation and Policy Development will perform three core functions:

Drive improvement in the delivery of municipal services

- Identify, develop, and implement high-impact innovations and new policies.
- Manage projects that focus on service and business model innovation.
- Explore best practices in other cities, facilitate their importation to New Bedford, and pursue and manage grants that support the process.

Build and grow innovation capabilities

- Identify training needs for employees to ensure the effective utilization of new technologies and policies.
- Redesign procedures and practices to deliver essential services in a timely and effective manner.
- Facilitate the use of artificial intelligence applications to expand operational efficiency and problem-solving capabilities.
- Track and report on innovation metrics and business impact on a regular basis.

Champion innovation

- Promote a municipal innovation agenda to City employees and stakeholders, and invite their ideas and feedback.
- Promote the City as a recognized innovation leader among

municipalities nationally to build brand and better attract and retain talent.

- Identify external relationships that may accelerate innovation and its practical implementation through public-private partnerships.

The Chief of Innovation and Policy Development will be a data-driven decision maker with experience in municipal finance and managing staff. Anyone interested in applying can visit <https://mss.newbedford-ma.gov/mss/employmentopportunities/default.aspx>.

Auditors found \$12.3 million in Massachusetts public benefits fraud in 2023

By Alison Kuznitz

State House News Service

Investigators in Auditor Diana DiZoglio's office discovered nearly \$2.9 million worth of public benefits fraud from October through December, with the vast majority of money linked to MassHealth.

The Bureau of Special Investigations detected fraud in 96 out of the 1,451 cases it examined in the second quarter of fiscal year 2024, according to a report recently filed with the Legislature.

Investigators found \$2,083,270.85 in MassHealth fraud; \$692,581.50 in SNAP fraud; \$74,195.05 in fraud tied to the Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children program;

\$7,909.33 in fraud connected to the Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled, and Children program; and \$796.95 in fraud linked to the Personal Care Attendant Program.

The bureau also recovered \$228,185.97 through restitution settlements, DiZoglio's office said.

"The work of BSI fraud examiners ensures taxpayer dollars used to fund Massachusetts' public benefits programs are managed effectively so that programs are available to residents who truly need them," the report stated. "As a result of BSI's investigations, public assistance fraud cases are referred to agencies for administrative action, fraudulent overpayments are recovered through civil agreements, individuals are disqualified from programs for specified periods of time, and cases are prosecuted in state and federal courts."

In fiscal year 2023, investigators identified more than \$12.3 million in public benefits fraud.

OPINION: Response to Betty Ussach: "Bibi provokes TDS and Trump is to blame for everything"

The following is an opinion sent to New Bedford Guide. It does not reflect the opinion of New Bedford Guide, nor is it an OP-ED. In fairness and objectivity, we share opinions from our readers whether we agree or disagree with their opinion.

Do you have a counter opinion to this opinion? Have an opinion

about something else? Email us at info@newbedfordguide.com.

The following is a response to Betty Ussach's Opinion piece, entitles, "It's distressing that people support Netanyahu, Trump's narcissistic, destructive agendas".

"The constant blaming of everything wrong is Trump's fault, known as Trump Derangement Syndrome (TDS), is living in a certain author's gray matter permanently now. Hamas attacking Israel and Israel's response is somehow interconnected to Trump. Can't make this up! Trump had every right to exercise all legal options to the bogus charges, many under novel legal theories. We still have due process!



Facebook photo.

But you wouldn't know that if you only watch TDS news stations which most are. Bibi had every right to defend his country and

ensure the enemy is completely defeated, never to be attacked again in an ambush of innocent civilians. Rapes, beheadings and torture are all acceptable to the author, just be compassionate in your response. Shameful! Hamas has taken billions of dollars and used it for war purposes, building tunnels under hospitals and buying weapons all with the intent on destroying Israel, with the support of the Palestinian people.

There isn't much room for compassion when the enemy butchers your citizens in an unprovoked act of war. The founding principles of any nation are to ensure the safety and sovereignty of its citizens and country. Principles obviously devoid as expressed in the opinion piece. Again, somehow Trump is lumped in with the war as losing international respect for each nation.

What Trump supposedly has to do with the Israel/Hamas conflict is further proof of TDS. Conversely, while Trump was President, the world was at peace, initiated the Abraham Accords and brought great economic improvement to all economies and demographics. Facts not acknowledge by those suffering TDS.



Facebook photo.

The most delusional statement of all is believing the American new media is the most accurate! Now that's one hallucination! It has been proven over and over that most "main stream" news media, that the author watches, has been proven to lie, misstate, take out of context and distort the truth to continue the hatred of DT.

Russia Gate-False, Laptop-Real, FISA Abuse-True, Hillary falsely started Russia to deflect from her email scandal-True, the list goes on and on, but you wouldn't know it if you watched Fake News. Hence the continued TDS living in many people's gray matter.

Lastly, when did it become a "destructive agenda" to put America and Americans first and bring back jobs moved overseas due to cheap labor and little or no environmental regulations to ensure the well being of our citizen's first? Patriotism is

not a destructive agenda! Unfortunately the hatred made people vote personality over policy.

The Fake News did their job, Orange Man Bad! Look what we have now; world wars, inflation, open borders with known terrorists already here, rampant gang crime and soaring energy costs that nobody can afford. The tide is turning and when DJ becomes 47 I hope those suffering from TDS, get help and be prepared for more world peace and God blessing America again.”-Nelson Strebor.

New Bedford's Mayor Mitchell leads group of U.S. mayors to Israel

Delegation from U.S. Conference of Mayors met with Israeli and Palestinian officials on trip sponsored by Project Interchange.

“NEW BEDFORD – Mayor Jon Mitchell chaired a group of U.S. Mayors on a trip to Israel earlier this week on behalf of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the leading organization representing American cities. Mayor Mitchell is a member of USCM's Board of Trustees.

The delegation spent four days in Israel meeting with municipal leaders, academics, business leaders, and experts from both Israel and Palestine. They also held discussions with released hostages and their families, and others coordinating humanitarian aid in the region. Site visits included Tel-Aviv, Jerusalem, and the city of Sderot on the border with Gaza. In the Oct. 7, 2023 attack by the terror

group Hamas, 70 civilians, including 20 police officers, were murdered in Sderot.

Mayor Mitchell was back at City Hall on Friday.

“Although this is the USCM’s fourth mayoral delegation to Israel, the issues in the region today are more relevant than ever to Americans,” Mayor Mitchell said. “The current conflict is widening the political fault lines in our country, and I believe that it is important for mayors, as the leaders of their cities, to take opportunities like this to deepen their understanding of a situation that, as everyone can agree, is complicated and difficult.”

The trip was sponsored by a joint program between the USCM and the American Jewish Committee’s Project Interchange, which facilitates exchanges between Israeli, Palestinian, European, and American officials. The mission of the program is to enhance Americans’ understanding of the region’s politics by exposing mayors to diverse perspectives and promoting new and mutually beneficial relationships with Israeli and Palestinian leaders. This is the program’s fourth mayoral delegation to Israel, which was funded entirely by the program.

Participants included Mayor Daniel Rickman of Columbia, South Carolina, Mayor Travis Stovall of Gresham, Oregon, and officials from the USCM and AJC. Based on security considerations, the USCM requested that members of the delegation refrain from announcing the trip beforehand or releasing details of the itinerary prior to return.”-City of New Bedford.

OPINION: “It’s distressing that people support Netanyahu, Trump’s narcissistic, destructive agendas”

The following is an opinion sent to New Bedford Guide. It does not reflect the opinion of New Bedford Guide, nor is it an OP-ED. In fairness and objectivity, we share opinions from our readers whether we agree or disagree with their opinion.

Do you have a counter opinion to this opinion? Have an opinion about something else? Email us at info@newbedfordguide.com.

“The stunning defiance and arrogance of Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump.

Each phase of Israel’s response to the Hamas attack of October 7th reveals the depth of arrogance, self-righteousness and selfishness of Benjamin Netanyahu. The comparison to Donald Trump is startling. Each man is facing criminal convictions and is delaying judicial accountability: Netanyahu by continuing the horrendous war upon Gaza and Trump by fomenting and threatening civil war and utilizing every trial delaying tactic.

Devoid of compassion or commitment to the founding principles of their nations each man is doubling down on hateful rhetoric and is appealing to the vindictive and nationalist tendencies of millions of supporters.

Each man has the ability and possibility of completely

destroying any international respect or support previously accorded their nation. The principles of rule of law, equality and fairness have no significance to them but are obstacles to their dictatorial aspirations.

It is particularly distressing that in two of the most educationally advanced nations, with unlimited access to accurate news, that hundreds of thousands of citizens continue to believe obvious lies, and support each man despite overwhelming evidence of their unethical, narcissistic and destructive agendas.”-Betty Ussach, Dartmouth.

House Democrats Propose Additional \$500 Million For Massachusetts Shelter System

By Alison Kuznitz

State House News Service

Top House Democrats unveiled plans Wednesday to invest \$500 million in the emergency assistance family shelter system in the next fiscal year, hundreds of millions of dollars less than the Healey administration’s projection of costs.

Matching Gov. Maura Healey’s line item budget recommendation, the House intends to level-fund emergency family shelter at \$325 million, though the administration anticipates the shelter system price tag will reach \$915 million in fiscal 2025. The House’s budget proposal augments the \$325 million figure by pulling \$175 million from the state’s Transitional Escrow Fund.

The fund, composed of surplus dollars and federal COVID-19 relief money, is at the crux of a House and Senate supplemental budget debate over how to replenish shelter funding before the system runs out of money sometime this spring.

“This thing is a fluid discussion,” House Ways and Means Chairman Aaron Michlewitz told reporters during a briefing Wednesday. “You go back nine months ago, and it was a different discussion than it is today, so it’s hard to say exactly where this is going to be in six to nine months. We think that the number that we’re putting out today is, or putting on the table for discussion within the House, is one that we think gets us far enough along that we can see where we are going forward.”

While Healey in November imposed a 7,500 cap on the over-capacity shelter system, she based her \$325 million allocation on a caseload of 4,100 families. With the state at its cap for months now, there were 736 families waiting to access emergency shelter on Wednesday, according to a spokesperson for the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities.

The fully unveiled House shelter funding approach for fiscal 2025 appears to signal a preference for continuing a pay-as-they-go approach to the shelter crisis and an attempt to not make more money available for shelter costs that have exploded and are affecting the Legislature’s ability to make other investments throughout the state budget.

Healey and Senate Democrats want the state to make the full \$863 million Transitional Escrow Fund available to cover family shelter costs, but at least so far top House Democrats do not favor that approach.

Massachusetts has spent \$504 million on operating emergency shelters so far this fiscal year, according to a biweekly report released Monday from the Healey administration. The

report noted March invoices are still “being received and processed.”

The state is spending about \$10,000 per family in the shelter system on a monthly basis, Senate Ways and Means Chairman Michael Rodrigues said last month.

Grappling with an unpredictable stream of new arrivals and a worsening revenue picture, lawmakers have used supplemental spending bills to plug major shelter funding gaps. Lawmakers are also wrestling with how to adjust the state’s right-to-shelter law, particularly imposing time limits on shelter stays, to prevent the system from collapsing under its high costs.

House Speaker Ron Mariano, who’s repeatedly condemned the lack of federal funding to support the migrant crisis, struck a more positive note Wednesday when describing his branch’s latest approach to covering steep shelter system expenses.

“Being an eternal optimist, things could change. Things could change next year, and we want to maintain as much control over this process as we can,” Mariano said. “You know, as we deal with the ebb and flow, we’re never quite sure what the numbers are going to be, so to anticipate the end number, I think it’s a bit premature. I’m always hopeful that something happens in Washington that brings some sort of, maybe not a solution, but a tightening up of the immigration system.”

Any serious run at passing federal immigration reforms appears unlikely at best until after this fall’s elections.

The House’s proposed use of the Transitional Escrow Fund to cover shelter costs could influence negotiations with the Senate over a supplemental budget in which the branches already disagree over how to pull from or potentially drain that fund.

Debate over the spending breakdown was initiated in January by

Healey, who alongside her annual budget filed a supplemental budget that sought to drain the fund to cover shelter caseloads, school districts costs, case management, and health and community services. Healey's budget team expected a \$90 million funding gap with the proposal.

The House passed a supplemental budget in March steering \$245 million from the fund to emergency shelters for fiscal 2024. Meanwhile, the Senate passed a version that more closely hewed to Healey's request, allowing the administration to drain the entire account for this fiscal year and the following year.

"I think the state has a long history of providing supplemental funding as needed for the emergency assistance shelter system, but obviously in the past year, it's an unprecedented time in how much funding is needed to sustain the program," Kelly Turley, associate director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, said. "It's not new for the Legislature to almost knowingly underfund the program at the start of the fiscal year."

Michlewitz demurred when asked whether the Senate's approach is considered a "non-starter" in supplemental budget negotiations as the House now proposes using \$175 million from the fund in its annual budget proposal. He serves as the lead House negotiator on the six-member conference committee.

"We're in negotiations right now on the supplemental budget, so we'll have to see what shakes out," said Michlewitz. "I think I gave up a long time (ago) on guessing when we're going to come to an exact agreement, on what day it's going to be, but we're working – we're continually talking with our Senate counterparts right now."

Michlewitz later Wednesday indicated he was not aware of the date when the shelter system could run out of money, after he was asked by a reporter about that possibility happening by next week.

Turley warned delayed action from the Legislature could force the Healey administration to further restrict eligibility and access to the shelter system for migrant families, as well as Bay Staters facing homelessness.

“We’re continuing to hear from providers, advocates and state officials that families continue to be staying in Logan Airport as an alternative because they haven’t been able to access emergency assistance shelter or overflow spaces, and these are families who have already been deemed eligible for shelter,” Turley said.