

## Democratic cities that welcomed migrants are starting to roll back aid

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When a wave of migrants began arriving in Democratic-run cities far from the Southern border two years ago, officials welcomed them with open arms. Now they're limiting aid to new arrivals as their instinct for compassion confronts hard budgetary realities.

In recent days, New York and Chicago — two of the nation's largest cities — have instituted substantial changes to their shelter policies. In Chicago, the city began evicting migrants who had overstayed a new 60-day time limit, saying it did not have the resources to meet the need.

In New York, migrants had benefited from the city's unique right to shelter, which guarantees emergency housing for as long as anyone needs it.

Last Friday, those rules were significantly altered for migrants without children, the culmination of a months-long struggle by the city to curtail its legal obligations to new arrivals as their number surpassed 180,000 and the cost of shelter soared.

Similar dynamics are unfolding elsewhere: In Denver, officials began closing some migrant shelters in recent weeks and reinstated time limits for stays. In Massachusetts, which has also seen an influx of migrants, the legislature is moving toward instituting a cap on how long people can stay in shelters.

For deep-blue cities with long histories of embracing immigrants, the latest influx of newcomers — many of them seeking asylum — has produced a sometimes-painful reckoning with their stated values. The impulse to welcome new arrivals is “deep-rooted, but it's expensive,” particularly in cities with steep housing costs, said Muzaffar Chishti, a senior fellow at the Migration Policy Institute.

Cities rapidly learned that the current wave of migrants — some of them traveling on buses paid for by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott (R) but many finding their own way — is of a different order, Chishti said. For instance, New York Mayor Eric Adams (D) initially cast himself as the “anti-Abbott,” Chishti said, but his rhetoric shifted dramatically as the number of arrivals skyrocketed, along with the costs of helping them.

“This is where you would say that the politics of the Democratic Party were changed by this chapter in U.S. migration history,” Chishti said.

Democratic-run cities and states have begged for more help from the federal government, including pushing for a legislative deal to overhaul the immigration system. In January, nine Democratic governors wrote to President Biden that cities and states “cannot indefinitely respond” to the influx without congressional action.

But the issue remains caught in a political impasse in Washington, even as immigration has emerged as a top issue in the presidential campaign.

Cities have warned that the budgetary strains caused by the migrant influx would oblige them to cut services. New York has already implemented some budget cuts, including to spending on migrants, but is still set to spend more than \$4 billion on the crisis in the current fiscal year, a city official testified in February.

In Denver, where more than 40,000 migrants have passed through the shelter system since the end of 2022, the city recently made budget cuts in response to the increased spending on aid to newcomers. The cuts included reducing hours at community centers and eliminating some recreational programs, drawing criticism from local leaders.

Denver Mayor Mike Johnston (D) said in an interview that while the city remains committed to helping newcomers, it needed to strike a balance. Residents would be “upset with us if we were not to provide a single service to migrants,” he said, “and they’d be mad at us if we cut all our city services.”

Advocates warn that rolling back assistance to migrants — many of whom have made difficult journeys from Central and South America — will exacerbate what is already a humanitarian crisis for thousands of people who are trying their best to make ends meet and leave overcrowded shelters.

In Chicago, Mayor Brandon Johnson, a liberal Democrat who took office last year, announced his shelter eviction policy in November but delayed it multiple times as subzero temperatures gripped the city and advocates denounced the plans as cruel. The rules, which instituted a 60-day limit on shelter stays, took effect Sunday. The city initially said 34 migrants would be required to leave, but only a handful did while the others were granted last-minute extensions.

In a statement, Johnson said that Chicago remained “committed to compassion” and that limiting migrants’ time in city shelters would encourage them to find housing elsewhere. The city, he said, is “advancing a pathway to stability and self-sufficiency.”

Annie Gomberg, a lead organizer with the volunteer network supporting Chicago’s migrant population, said people already have plenty of incentives to find alternative housing. “Every person I’ve talked to wants to leave the shelter,” she said. “But they lack the pathways to do so.”

Most new arrivals face steep hurdles and a long wait for work authorization — at least six months for asylum seekers — and cannot access rental assistance. Many don't speak English and lack a credit history, all barriers to securing long-term housing, advocates say. Gomberg fears that migrants who are evicted from city shelters will end up on the streets.

“The idea that we could ever just say, ‘Okay, you’re on your own’ to anyone who is enduring this level of difficulty is not the kind of society we want to live in,” Gomberg said.

But as costs mount, cities and states have found themselves facing difficult choices. In Massachusetts, the only state that guarantees emergency housing to families with children, the shelter system has been overwhelmed in recent months, with migrants representing about half of the occupants. Last year, Gov. Maura Healey (D) instituted a cap on the number of families able to receive shelter.

The emergency housing program cost about \$250 million in the last fiscal year, but that figure is expected to balloon to nearly \$1 billion in the current fiscal year, said state Rep. Aaron Michlewitz, a Democrat who chairs the legislative body's ways and means committee.

When negotiations over a bipartisan border deal in Congress collapsed in February, Massachusetts legislators realized that “the cavalry was not coming,” Michlewitz said. This month, the state House passed a budget measure that would limit the length of time in shelters to nine months, with some exceptions. The current average stay is 14 months, Michlewitz said.

Healey is open to limiting the length of stay in shelters, said Karissa Hand, a spokeswoman for the governor, since the program is a “temporary, emergency option and we are facing severe capacity concerns due to federal inaction on immigration reform.”

In New York, the migrant crisis recently forced an unprecedented adjustment to the city's right to shelter rules, established by court orders going back to the 1980s. The rules require the city to provide shelter to anyone who needs it, a framework credited with nearly eliminating street homelessness.

Since 2022, the city has opened more than 200 emergency sites exclusively to shelter migrants, commandeering hotels and converting spaces into dormitories. There are about 65,000 migrants in New York's shelter system, a little more than half of the overall total, the city says.

On Friday, the city announced that it had reached a settlement in a legal battle over its shelter obligations. From now on, migrants who are 23 and over without children will be entitled to an initial stay of 30 days in city shelters. After that, they will be assessed on a case-by-case basis and must demonstrate certain “extenuating circumstances” to remain.

New York's right to shelter “was never intended to apply to a population larger than most U.S. cities descending on the five boroughs in less than two years,” said Adams, the city's mayor, in a statement. Friday's settlement “grants us additional flexibility during times of crisis.”

Robert Hayes, the lawyer who brought the landmark 1979 lawsuit *Callahan v. Carey* that led to New York's right to shelter, called the agreement a "Faustian bargain."

Hayes said he was relieved that the underlying right to shelter was preserved, but "it pains me to have two separate and unequal systems for people based on where they're from." The new conditions apply to adult migrants who arrived in the United States after March 15, 2022, and are afraid to return to their home countries.

"The red line I worry about is Day 31, when people are put on the streets," said Hayes, who is now president of the Community Healthcare Network in New York.

In the absence of a negotiated agreement, a judge might have made more drastic changes to the city's obligations to the homeless or even jettisoned the right to shelter altogether, said Joshua Goldfein, a staff attorney at the Legal Aid Society, which represents the plaintiffs in the right-to-shelter case.

Now the group is gearing up to monitor whether the city meets its responsibility to assess individual cases. "They have every incentive to not do this properly and try to chase people out," Goldfein said. "It certainly creates a lot of work for us."

#### **CORRECTION**

A previous version of this article incorrectly quoted a spokeswoman for Massachusetts Gov. Maura Healey (D) as saying a time limit on shelter stays is a "temporary, emergency action." She said the shelter program is a "temporary, emergency option." The article also misstated the age of migrants now entitled to an initial stay of 30 days in New York shelters. They are 23 and over, not over 23. The article has been corrected.