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Surprise relocation of busy Worcester welfare and housing office will shut out many poor, advocates say

The move follows a trend by the Baker administration to relocate other vital offices serving the poor to more remote areas with limited public transportation.

By [Kay Lazar](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 6, 2020, 2 hours ago



Boston-01/28/20 Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker. Photo by John Tlumacki/Globe Staff(business) JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF/THE BOSTON GLOBE

The Baker administration is preparing to relocate a vital welfare and housing aid office in downtown Worcester to a shopping plaza miles away, with few public transportation options nearby.

Advocates and local public officials are furious about the planned move, which they said came with little discussion or warning. They said it will force thousands of poor people to spend time and money they don't have to access services they desperately need.

"The move may make the office inaccessible to many of our poorest neighbors," advocates from more than a dozen charitable organizations in Worcester wrote in a letter sent to the Baker administration last week. "Those who are working poor will have to take even more time off work in order to access services that are meant to help them escape poverty."

The planned relocation is the latest in a series of similar moves by the Baker administration to relocate urban offices serving the poor to more remote locations that are harder to access without a car. In the last 18 months, the administration has [relocated three busy Department](#) of Children and Families offices in Lowell, Malden, and Cambridge to more suburban sites with fewer bus and train options.

Local officials and advocates are urging the administration to open a small satellite office in downtown Worcester to serve residents who can't make the trip to the new site, which is near Millbury.

A Baker administration spokeswoman said the current downtown location was problematic because the building sits atop a steep hill that is hard to access for some, and lacks free parking. The administration said the new location was selected in part because it's on flat ground. And time was of the essence, because the lease was expiring this month.



“The new location improves accessibility and is directly on a bus line,” the administration said in a statement. “It provides far better accessibility for older adults and individuals with disabilities, and offers ample free parking.”

A study by the Central West Justice Center, a legal aid organization in Worcester, showed only one bus route serves the new office; it runs once an hour, it said, and to catch that bus, most clients would have to take another bus to a downtown hub. A second bus route drops passengers a half mile away, along a busy secondary road with no sidewalks.

The current Worcester building, which houses the Department of Transitional Assistance and Department of Housing and Community Development, has the advantage of proximity to many of its clients. It sits on Sudbury Street in a neighborhood where half

proximity to many of its clients. It sits on Sudbury Street, in a neighborhood where many of the residents live below poverty level, according to federal data, and is within walking distance for many. It's also near doctors' offices, City Hall, and many other services, such as fuel assistance, job training, and child care, that low-income families typically seek when they visit the housing and welfare office.

According to a January survey by the administration of clients who visited the downtown welfare office, 35 percent used their own car, 31 percent walked from another downtown Worcester location, and 10 percent used public transportation. The rest used a car service or hitched a ride from friends or family.

Worcester state Rep. Mary Keefe and six other Worcester-area state lawmakers sent a letter to the Baker administration last week saying that if the state "wanted to discourage and make it difficult for people to access these services that this absolutely would be the direction to go in."

Keefe added in an interview: "They are fragmenting the safety net of so many organizations downtown that work together to make sure these vulnerable families are provided for. It's very disturbing."

Worcester state Senator Michael Moore said he suspects one of the governor's reasons for relocating the welfare office is to cut spending; he said administration officials told him the move will save the state \$250,000 in the first year. All agree the current site is not ideal, Moore said, but the new site is not a reasonable solution.

"It's disrespectful and it's not providing the services we need to provide," he said.

The Baker administration said clients of the welfare office have alternatives if the new location isn't convenient. The Department of Transitional Assistance said it has "greatly expanded and prioritized self-service options to provide increased access for clients remotely, through telephone, online, and mobile options."

But Gina Plata-Nino, an attorney with the Central West Justice Center, said few services

But Gina Plata-Nino, an attorney with the Central West Justice Center, said few services provided by the state at the office are available online, and many residents, especially those who are older, or who are not fluent in English, have difficulty accessing the online services.

She said the state office serves more than 50,000 residents a year who receive food stamps and other assistance. She said research by her organization indicates the typical bus ride for those who use public transportation to the current office location will double from a one-hour trip, to two hours at the new site.

“If [the Baker administration] would have had a conversation with the community,” Plata-Nino said, “we would have been able to give them feedback that this move will not be accessible to most of our clients.”

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