

YOUNG LOBBYISTS IN PUSH TO FUND HOMELESSNESS LAW THEY HELPED PASS

By Andy Metzger
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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, MARCH 10, 2015.....Among the lobbyists and advocates rooting for an eleventh-hour victory at the end of the last legislative session was a group of 12- and 13-year-olds from a Boston synagogue who had made student homelessness their cause.

"We thought that homelessness was a big problem and we said, 'How can we help?'" said Max Davis, a 12-year-old from Stoneham. "Instead of just trying to put a Band-Aid on it, we tried to actually make a difference and so we decided to look at a law or a bill and try and get the bill passed."

The bill they chose, which requires the state to contract for services for unaccompanied homeless youth, was enacted on New Year's Eve and signed into law on Jan. 6 as one of Deval Patrick's last acts as governor.

Along the way to enactment, the five-some from Temple Israel on Longwood Avenue in Boston received some counseling from lobbyist Charles Glick, who said he "got my start" in the Jewish community, and learned of the students' interest from Max's mother.

Glick, who lobbies for the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless among other groups, said he held a fundraiser for Speaker Robert DeLeo at his office and invited the youthful advocates as his guests.

"The speaker could not have been more tickled to have a group of kids who were there," Glick told the News Service. "He was just so impressed that they would take a policy issue so seriously."

Max was joined at the State House Thursday by Sophie Lewis, 12, of Newton; Esther Trask, 13, of Brookline; and Zack Iwatsuki, 13, of Newton. The group said Hannah Hummel, 12, of Newton, also assisted in the effort, which was a community service project associated with their bar and bat mitzvahs.

The new law, which also makes permanent a commission on unaccompanied homeless youth, is subject to appropriation and Sophie said after the law passed, "We wanted to get funding for it."

Homeless advocates are seeking a total of \$4 million for homeless youth and young adults.

In their efforts to secure funding for the program the youngsters are distributing chocolates shaped like a house along with facts and figures about the scope of the problem. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education estimated there are 6,000 unaccompanied homeless youth in Massachusetts public and charter schools, and the special commission said there is another group of homeless youths who are "highly mobile and largely invisible."

Those not yet old enough to vote have helped push bills into law before. Last year, Sean Lesniak, a 9-year-old from Lowell, was credited for his advocacy before the passage of a law banning the possession of shark fins.

When lobbying for passage of the homelessness bill, the group of pre-teens sold bracelets that displayed a message and the bill number and used self-illumination.

"What they didn't tell me was the darn thing actually glowed in the dark, so I literally went to bed at night realizing our work had not been done," said Glick, who said he wore the wristband from the time he received it until the legislation passed. "Every night it was a reminder that you need to get up in the morning and make sure this piece of legislation gets done."

Through sales of the wristbands, the Temple Israel youths raised money for Youth on Fire, an AIDS Action Committee program for homeless youths in Cambridge, and they said they later received a letter from someone in his early 20s who said their fundraising helped him secure housing.

Esther's father, Jack Hall, is a lobbyist. The parents who accompanied the group through State House hallways Thursday said they guided their children's efforts with the help of Hall and Glick.

Glick said he believes they had an "impact" on the bill's passage and he was "thrilled" the group chose a serious issue that doesn't serve their own interests as part of their bar and bat mitzvahs.

Of the four students who worked the halls and legislative offices Thursday, only Sophie said the experience hadn't raised the idea of one day becoming a professional lobbyist.

Max said lobbying was a "good learning experience," and said he thinks the breakfast event with DeLeo provided some perspective.

"I think that actually really helped because it let us get a sense of what the legislators are really like," Max said. "They're not stuck-up people. They're actual people that care."

Working on the issue attuned him to a problem that he said is not top-of-mind for many at his school.

"They just think about oh you know this kid's a cool kid or this kid's weird. They don't think about, is this kid homeless, is this kid in need?" Max said.

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