



MASSACHUSETTS COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless and Representative Jim O'Day Lead Efforts to Mark World Homeless Day at the State House

BOSTON— Last week, groups across the globe marked World Homeless Day. Here in the Commonwealth, the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless joined with State Representatives Jim O'Day of West Boylston to mark the occasion by holding a legislative briefing at the State House on Wednesday, October 8th. The event provided an opportunity for legislators, their staff, and the public to learn more about the work of the state, the Coalition, and partner agencies to prevent and end homelessness in Massachusetts. The program featured powerful speakers who shared their first-hand experiences of homelessness and their journeys to increased housing stability, as well as updates and insights from advocates and state officials.

Commenting on the timeliness and importance of the event, Robyn Frost, Executive Director of the Coalition said, "The rates of families, youth, and individuals experiencing homelessness have been at an all-time high in Massachusetts. While state programs have helped those who need assistance, these programs and services simply cannot meet the increasing demand without additional housing and resources. Homelessness affects every community in Massachusetts, and, therefore, ending and preventing homelessness should be a top priority of every legislator and each state official."

A major focus of the event was on the need for the Legislature to pass pending legislation related to youth homelessness, "An Act providing housing and support services to unaccompanied homeless youth". This bill, also known as House Bill 135, was filed by Representative O'Day and former State Senator (and current U.S. Representative) Katherine Clark of Melrose. House Bill 135 currently is awaiting action by the House Committee on Ways and Means. If passed, this bill would provide infrastructure for a coordinated statewide response to unaccompanied youth homelessness by addressing the need for housing and supportive services for youth and young adults age 24 and younger who are experiencing homelessness outside the care and custody of a parent or legal guardian.

Speaking in support of the bill and the need for comprehensive youth homelessness resources was Val Riley, a youth advocate from Boston. In her remarks, Val said: "For the last 5 years I have dealt with being unstably housed. Most people don't consider going house-to-house being homeless – but when you have to bring everything you own from place to place, you lose a lot in the translation. You lose your favorite shirt, favorite pair of jeans. You lose your artwork, your journals, your books, and your make-up kit. Every time you move, something gets left behind. You have to live by everyone else's rules, and their problems become your problems...You don't have space to yourself – to meditate or self-reflect. You lose your stuff and you lose yourself in the process...Eventually you just become numb to all the loss. Nothing matters and you start building up walls and it's hard to accept help." Fortunately, through the support and assistance of one of the few existing youth homelessness programs, Val has found housing and is moving forward with her employment and education goals, from her new place of increased stability.

Representative O'Day remarked, "The issue of unaccompanied youth homelessness is tragic and widespread, directly impacting youth in my district and statewide. It is unconscionable that young people like Val are left to fend for themselves, without shelter or caregivers. House Bill 135 bill seeks to reduce youth homelessness and its adverse effects by funding a continuum of housing and support services geared specifically for unaccompanied homeless youth. The goal of these efforts is to improve housing and residential stability, reduce the risk of harm, and improve educational, physical, and mental health outcomes for this population."

Liz Rogers, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness, spoke to the crowd about the results of the 2014 Massachusetts Youth Count, the first-in-the-nation statewide survey of unaccompanied youth. Coordinated by the state's Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth, over 2,500 youth and young adults shared their experiences related to housing, services, and interactions with state systems of care, such as the educational, child welfare, foster care, and juvenile justice systems. Of those participating in the survey, 795 youth (33.2% of the respondents age 24 or younger) were currently experiencing homelessness out on their own. An additional 179 youth (7.5%) were found to be a high-risk of experiencing homelessness as an unaccompanied youth, while others previously were unaccompanied youth or had experienced homelessness with their parents or guardians. Rogers noted that while only a portion of unaccompanied youth across the state were captured in this survey, the findings are helping the state to move forward in developing a comprehensive, youth-focused response to unaccompanied youth homelessness. In addition, the analysis of this count and the survey process are informing preparations for the 2015 count.

The World Homeless Day briefing also highlighted the need for updated policies and renewed resources related to the state's response to family homelessness. Among those speaking to those issues was Sabine, a mother who shared her heart-wrenching experience of staying in places not meant for human habitation with her toddler before she was able to access shelter and housing resources. In spite of working two jobs at the time, Sabine could not afford housing and found herself "living out of a stroller" in transit stations and emergency rooms, before finally gaining admittance to the state's Emergency Assistance family shelter and services program. Similar to Sabine, 607 families first had to stay in places not meant for human habitation with their children before accessing shelter during state fiscal year 2014, according to data from the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development. The Coalition and other advocacy groups have been working to change this policy to allow eligible families with no other place to go into shelter sooner, so that vulnerable families are not subjected to further risks while experiencing homelessness.

LeAnna, who recently exited homelessness, shared with the audience her struggles and successes as a mother dealing with housing instability and a physical disability. She noted, "Attitude is a constant choice", while also underscoring the need for deeper state investments to provide housing and services for families and individuals with disabilities.

Luz Arroyo, Motel Re-housing Case Manager with Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership, a participant in the briefing said, "For me, it was very encouraging to hear the stories of families who have overcome barriers to obtain a stable home for their family. This makes me feel that our work with families can have excellent results in improving family stability."

"I am once again pleased to partner with the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless on an event that so clearly and thoughtfully outlines the needs for the homeless population across the Commonwealth," Representative O'Day stated. "Homelessness in our state is pervasive and ongoing, and is not going away without our collective intervention."

Other legislative priorities discussed at World Homeless Day included the continued re-investment in the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP), a housing subsidy program for families, elders, and persons with disabilities; providing increased benefits for participants in the Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled and Children Program (EAEDC); maintaining funding for the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) homelessness prevention program; and increasing funding for state-funded public housing operating subsidies.

Kelly Turley, Director of Legislative Advocacy at the Coalition said, "The voices calling for change at the State House here for World Homeless Day are part of the larger movement to advocate for funding and resource development in order to improve housing opportunities and support services to end and prevent homelessness for *all* people across the Commonwealth."

For more information on the Coalition's mission, public policy priorities, and direct service programs, please visit www.mahomeless.org. For basic facts on homelessness in Massachusetts, please go to www.mahomeless.org/advocacy/basic-facts. For more details about the 2014 Massachusetts Youth Count, please visit www.mahomeless.org/files/2014_MA_Youth_Count_Report_FINAL_2.pdf.

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