A new bill that would strengthen a program that provides aid to over 21,000 low-income elderly, children, and disabled citizens throughout the Commonwealth is awaiting a vote in the state house. House Bill 529 seeks to make adjustments to the Emergency Aid for the Elderly, Disabled and Children (EAEDC) program, a 27 year old service that has never seen any increases in the amount of money it can provide. Representative James J. O’Day and Senator Patricia D. Jehlen sponsor the bill.

Currently, the EAEDC monthly grant is $303.70, the same amount as back in 1988. This bill proposes increasing grants to match the levels found in other aid programs, based on household size—for example, an individual on EAEDC could receive up to $428/month with rent allowance.

Another goal of the bill is to remove the reduction for homeless participants. EAEDC program participants who are experiencing homelessness receive a reduced grant of only $92.80 per month.
“By eliminating this grant reduction, EAEDC participants experiencing homelessness in or out of a shelter will not be further financially disrupted and may be able to transition into a more stable living arrangement sooner,” said Khadeejah Ahmad, a spokesperson for Rep. O’Day.

Advocates of the bill refer to the reduction as a “penalty” for homelessness. “It’s almost as if they’ll never be able to exit their situation when benefits are reduced,” said Kelly Turley, executive director of Mass. Coalition for the Homeless.

H529 would also increase the allowable personal asset limit from $250 to $2,500, allowing more EAEDC participants to have assets and to move toward housing stability. As Ahmad notes, participants would be “better able to afford ongoing rent, first month’s rent, last month’s rent, and security deposit payments.” The bill would also exclude the first $15,000 in a vehicles value, letting EAEDC participants own cars.

Finally, the bill would also create an annual cost of living adjustment (COLA) for EAEDC program participant, which would provide increased benefits in response to the broader group of participants.

Much of the program’s 27 year history has been one of survival: both Ahmad and Turley note it has come close to getting slashed in the past, and some benefits, like those for children, have been reduced. Advocates and politicians spent more effort keeping the program alive and the funding relatively steady rather than expanding it.

“This is a relatively… small program that has been written off in the past. Multiple campaigns have tried to keep it together and expand it, rather than have it get it slashed all together,” says Ahmad.

While the state budget seems to be the biggest obstacle, supporting the program may not be the economic hit some legislators expect it to be. The federal government actually reimburses states for financially supporting people while they apply for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits. As Sister Linda Bessom, a community organizer with Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, told state legislators, “Last fiscal year 2015, the Social Security Administration reimbursed the Commonwealth with $9,579,953.74 for 2,777 who transferred into this federal program.”

These days it looks like supporters have a real shot of expanding the EAEDC, especially in the wake of a public hearing on H.529 on October 27. “We were really heartened by the hearing,” says Turley. “We received a positive response from Committee on Elder Affairs and felt a warm reception.”

Other organizations that testified at the hearing included St. Vincent De Paul Council of Attleboro, Sisters of Saint Anne, Lynn Economic Opportunity, Samaritans Steps, Emmaus, the Massachusetts Association of Residential Care Homes, and students from Harvard Medical School.

When asked about why the bill might have finally have the momentum it, Turley credits a longer, two-year time period to discuss the issue with legislators—as opposed to the usual, rushed scrambles before budget hearings—and broader organization around the Commonwealth.

There is currently no set date to vote on the bill.