Homeless Children Out in the Cold: 
Big Problem – Simple Solution

The Issue: Since September 2012, when the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) imposed harsh new restrictions on which homeless families with children can access Emergency Assistance (EA) shelter, more than 160 families have been forced to sleep in places “not meant for human habitation” before they were placed in emergency shelter.

Families are sleeping in cars and in abandoned buildings with their children. According to the Massachusetts Hospital Association, families are showing up “in droves” to hospital emergency rooms to be safe, resulting in unnecessary health care expenditures.

The Simple Solution: Fortunately, this issue can be fixed easily and at little cost.

- The solution is to amend the language in line item 7004-0101 to ensure that families who have nowhere else to go are placed in shelter when they are at “imminent risk of staying in a place not meant for human habitation.” The line item should also be amended to provide that families who have nowhere else to go are eligible for shelter if they have been forced to stay in more than 3 different places in 30 days and cannot return to any of those places or have spent at least one night in a time-limited, non-EA shelter situation that has now ended.

The Cost: Given the first 6 months of experience, we can predict that approximately 320 families per year would otherwise have to sleep in places not meant for human habitation before being placed in shelter. If each of these families were placed in shelter 2 nights earlier to avoid having to stay in such places, the cost to the Commonwealth would be only $64,000 per year. (320 x 2 x $100 average cost of shelter per night).

Protect Homeless Children:
Amend Item 7004-0101 in the FY 14 Budget to Protect Children at Imminent Risk of Staying in a Place Not Meant for Human Habitation

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7004-0101

For certain expenses of the emergency assistance program pursuant to section 30 of chapter 23B of the General Laws; provided, that eligibility shall be limited to families with incomes at or below 115 per cent of the 2011 or later-issued higher federal poverty level; provided further, that any family whose income exceeds 115 per cent of the federal poverty level while the family is receiving assistance funded by this item shall not become ineligible for assistance due to exceeding the income limit for a period of 6 months from the date that the income level was exceeded; provided further, that families that shall be eligible for assistance throughout a temporary emergency family shelter shall include: (i) families that are at risk of domestic abuse in their current housing situation or who are homeless because they fled domestic violence and have not had access to safe, permanent housing since leaving the housing situation in which they fled; (ii) families that, through no fault of their own, are homeless due to fire, flood, or natural disaster; (iii) families that, through no fault of their own, have been subject to eviction from their most recent housing due to: (a) foreclosure; (b) condemnation; (c) conduct by a guest or former household member who is not part of the household seeking emergency shelter and over whose conduct the remaining household members had no control; or (d) nonpayment of rent caused by a documented medical condition or diagnosed disability or caused by a documented loss of income within the last 12 months directly as a result of a change in household composition or a loss of income source through no fault of the family; and (iv) families who are in a housing situation where they are not the primary lease holder or who are in or at imminent risk of being in a housing situation not meant for human habitation and where there is or would be a substantial health and safety risk to the family that is likely to result in significant harm should the family remain in or enter such housing situation; provided further, that the health and safety risk shall be determined by the department of children and families through risk assessments; provided further, that families who have stayed in three or more housing situations within the past 30 days or have spent one or more nights in an emergency shelter situation not funded by this item and who can no longer stay in any of said housing or emergency shelter situations shall be deemed to be in a housing situation not meant for human habitation where there is a substantial health and safety risk to the family that is likely to result in significant harm should the family remain in such housing situation pursuant to subsection (iv) of this item; ..... Emergency Assistance (in items 7004-0101 and 7004-0103) should be funded for FY 14 at a total of at least $135,600,000, which is level-funding from FY 13.