



MASSACHUSETTS
COALITION
FOR THE HOMELESS

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July 17, 2015

The Honorable Stanley Rosenberg
The Honorable Karen Spilka
The Honorable Sal DiDomenico
The Honorable Viriato deMacedo

The Honorable Robert DeLeo
The Honorable Brian Dempsey
The Honorable Stephen Kulik
The Honorable Todd Smola

Re: Please override Governor Baker's vetoes of key funding for housing and services for unaccompanied youth and MRVP housing subsidies!

Dear Legislative Leadership and Members of the FY'16 Budget Conference Committee:

Thank you for your leadership in developing the state's fiscal year 2016 budget recommendations. I am writing on behalf of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless to thank you for your tireless work in crafting a budget that will strongly support families, youth, and adults who are at-risk and experiencing homelessness. We greatly appreciate your many efforts, including your actions to dramatically increase funding for the Massachusetts Rental Voucher program, strengthen the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition homelessness prevention program and the Alternative Housing Voucher Program, provide a larger clothing allowance to children in the Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, and expand the Earned Income Tax Credit for low-income households.

In light of the Governor's vetoes, I also am writing to respectfully ask for your leadership swiftly to restore funding in two key line items: 4000-0007 for unaccompanied youth and 7004-9024 for the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program.

**Housing and Services for Unaccompanied Youth Experiencing Homelessness
(Line Item 4000-0007)**

The Coalition urges you to **restore the language and funding under new line item 4000-0007 for housing and wraparound services for unaccompanied youth and young adults through age 24 who are experiencing homelessness out on their own**, without a parent or guardian. The \$2 million in funding would be used to implement the new landmark unaccompanied youth homelessness law, Chapter 450 of the Acts of 2014, and to build upon the ongoing work of the Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth. As you know, this funding is critical so that the state has the resources to address youth homelessness and to leverage additional resources to strengthen that response.

We are deeply disappointed that the Administration chose to veto this funding, unfairly citing the lack of final recommendations from the Special Commission, as the Commission has not been convened once yet by the Baker Administration. In the meantime, the Commission's working groups have continued to meet regularly to move forward the important agenda and previously issued recommendations of the Commission.

Currently, the Coalition is working with the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) and the Commission to enter and analyze the 2015 youth surveys and to interview partners from across the state who implemented the count at the regional and local levels. Once that is complete, we will provide an overview to your offices. This data will provide a snapshot of the experiences and circumstances of unaccompanied youth from across the Commonwealth, and underscore the need for swift and coordinated action.

I am attaching two blog posts with reactions of youth and youth providers to the news that the Legislature had recommended the funding. I hope that their words stay with you throughout the veto override process.

Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP, Line Item 7004-9024)

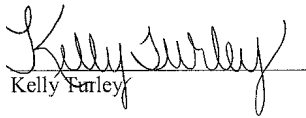
The Coalition urges you to restore the \$3 million vetoed by the Governor to bring the funding for MRVP to **\$90.9 million in FY'16, an incredible and much-needed \$25.9 million increase over the FY'15 allocation.**

The Coalition and other key advocacy groups met with the Department of Housing and Community Development this week to work on a distribution plan for the new MRVP subsidies, including recommendations to provide mobile vouchers for families living in shelters and motels; subsidies for unaccompanied youth and for adults experiencing chronic homelessness, and funding to preserve 13A units that are at risk of converting to market-rate. An override of this veto and continued substantial reinvestment in MRVP will move Massachusetts forward toward addressing homelessness and housing insecurity.

Thank you again to you and your colleagues for all of your hard work and your commitment to ensuring that all people in the Commonwealth have a safe and permanent place to call home.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns.

With gratitude and hope,



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“WE ARE NOT AN ENEMY. WE ARE HOUSELESS, NOT HOMELESS.” BY SYNTHIA KENNEDY



When I read that we had been allotted \$2 million, I cried.

We have worked so long, with so many sleepless nights and tear-filled days, to get people to do something to support us. We have prepared speeches and wondered about all of the possible effects of our outreach, education, seminars, and presentations on both the presenters and audience. To be honest, in all of my travels, hitch hiking, and sleeping outside (I hate the word “homeless”), I have never felt more full of terror, wonder, anxiety and naked-full-frontal-in-your-face realness as when the thought “this might all be in vain” crossed my mind. “Things may never change and I have exposed myself to all these people” -- sometimes several hundred people – sometimes I didn’t think it was worth it.

I cried when I heard the news because I can only imagine what this will mean to the teens and young adults who are at risk – who will now be able to see a significant change in services available to them.

This is one victory but it is not the end. We have much work to do with haste, diligence, and understanding.

I challenge you, the reader, to be bold, to make new friends, to try something new. I challenge you to be open, be fearless, and love like every person that walks into your life is a treasure -- unique and beautiful just like you.

We are not an enemy.

We are houseless not homeless.

Together, we can keep this going.

“THE THINGS THAT MATTER: ADVOCATING WITH AND FOR YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS” BY AYALA LIVNY

I pick up the phone.

“I saw the news...” Synthia says. “I just... I mean...” Pause. “It mattered” she finally says, quietly.

The news of the Massachusetts’ Legislature’s budget appropriations, including the \$2 million in new funding for programs and housing for homeless young adults, has become public and is starting to spread.

“Isn’t it amazing?” I reply. “We’ve worked for a long time to make it happen.” I pause. “What do you mean, “it mattered”?”

Quietly, she repeats herself. “It mattered. It really mattered” she says again.

Another pause.

“All those times we got up in front of strangers and told our stories. All those times I felt raw and open and scared and scarred and judged and ashamed and proud...they were worth it. It mattered. It made a difference. They actually did something. They heard what we said – they heard what we’ve been through and decided they would do something about it. Things are going to change for people. Because they listened.”

“Because you talked,” I reply.



“Because we talked. And because they listened,” she says, her voice growing louder.

In 2010, a coalition of providers and advocates came together under the leadership of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless to work to improve and expand housing and services for unaccompanied homeless youth. At one of our first meetings with a legislator, he told us “This seems like an important issue, but I don’t think there are any homeless young adults in my district.” We took this as a challenge, vowing to bring the voices of young adults experiencing homelessness directly to our legislators. They might brush us off, but they wouldn’t be able to do the same to young people willing to share their stories.

At the time I was the Program Manager of Youth on Fire, a drop-in center and HIV prevention program for homeless young adults ages 18-24. We began training members to speak to legislators, educators, organizers and anyone else who would listen; we trained them to tell their stories and demand the Commonwealth to do better by them.

“The thing that keeps me on the streets is simple the lack of affordable housing. It’s hard to keep a regular job when you don’t have a place to put your head, and without a job it’s hard to pay rent. And even when I have a job, I don’t make enough money to get a place or keep it for very long. And don’t even get me started on getting fired from jobs when they find out I’m homeless.... I am currently staying in a tent outside. I often get woken up at 4am when the tent collapses under the weight of the snow... Kids like me shouldn’t have to stay in a tent in the middle winter. Massachusetts can do better than this.” SC, age 22

He spoke. They listened.

“How did I get to this point in my life? It’s easy. At 16 my mom came to me and asked me ‘are you gay?’ I said ‘no’ because I was not sure. She told me that if I was, she and my dad would still love me. Then at 19, I came out as bisexual to both of my parents, and my mom said ‘no son of mine is going to be a faggot’. ... Being on the streets is a tough life – you never know where your next meal is going to come from, where you are going to lay your head, and even if you do get a chance to be inside, its usually from some dirty old man telling you ‘Hey, you can stay with me...’ but then he expects something sexual in return. You have a choice – either freeze on the streets and go hungry, or do what he asks. I have had to make that choice before – and sometimes the choice is not what I would want it to be.” SF, age 23

He spoke. They listened.

“One of the hardest things about being in this situation is feeling alone all the time – you feel that there’s no one out there for you. It’s like walking on a cliff – if you fall there’s no one to help you up. You just fall. ... I hope after hearing my story, you will be inspired to lend a helping hand – it doesn’t have to be a big thing. It could be a simple smile or a handshake. You could help program help youth like me. Or you could do something bigger and get this legislation passed. Whatever you do – just do something.” – IM, age 20

She spoke. They listened.

“I have never actually gone to a shelter, because I don’t trust them to keep me, my belongings, or my medication safe. I have friends who were sexually assaulted at shelters, and I feel like being on the streets is safer for me. It’s a messed up situation when the streets are the safest place for me to go. You can change that.” - MB, age 23

She spoke. They listened.

They listened. They couldn’t un-hear the stories these young people told. They couldn’t un-see the pictures they painted. And when you can’t un-see or un-hear things, the stories follow you until you do something about them.

And they did something about them.

Two million dollars is a lot of doing something. It is enough to fundamentally transform the safety net that has let too many of these young adults fall through the cracks.

The message is clear – and it is not just that the telling of these stories matter. The message this budget proclaims loudly and clearly is that the tellers of these stories matter. Powerfully and profoundly. For young adults who have been rejected and failed by every system claiming to protect and support them, mattering is not something that can be taken for granted. Being seen and heard and supported is not an everyday occurrence for young people on the streets.

But this budget says something different: **It matters. They matter. We matter.**

I couldn’t be more proud.