



Help Ensure that Families Experiencing Homelessness Do Not Have to Stay in Places Not Meant for Human Habitation: Testimony in Support of Swift Passage of House Bill 659

Prepared for the Joint Committee on Housing by Kelly Turley, Associate Director

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Good morning, Chairman Boncore, Chairman Honan, and members of the Joint Committee on Housing.

On behalf of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to express our unequivocal support for **House Bill 659, An Act to protect families experiencing homelessness from having to sleep in unsafe places**. This first-time bill was filed by Representative Marjorie Decker, as the next step in the nearly five-year struggle to undo the Department of Housing and Community Development's (DHCD) harmful eligibility practices for the Emergency Assistance (EA) family shelter and services program. Since the fall of 2012, the state has required many families experiencing homelessness to prove that they already have stayed in places not meant for human habitation before granting those children and families access to shelter and rehousing resources.

This shameful policy has led to at least 2,682 families only being approved for shelter after being subjected to staying with their children in emergency rooms, cars, campgrounds, transit stations, and other places to which few of us could imagine bringing our children. In the past year (FY'17) alone, 604 families were in unsafe places for at least one night before being approved for EA. This was 16% of all families approved. We know that many of these families initially applied for EA before the indignity of sleeping in such a place, but were sent away and told to come back once they could meet the twisted eligibility requirement.

House Bill 659 seeks to slightly expand DHCD eligibility categories by granting timely EA access to otherwise eligible families that would be heading to an unsafe places that night. It is worth emphasizing that these otherwise eligible families are families that have absolutely no other place to stay, have not been in an EA shelter placement in the past year, have incomes below 115% of the federal poverty guidelines (for 2017, this is \$1,957/month or \$23,483/year for a family of three), have not experienced a disqualifying eviction in the past three years, and the eligibility requirements go on, and on, and on.

This small change will not open the floodgates, as has been implied by the Baker Administration and the Patrick Administration before them. DHCD knows how to parse through eligibility documents and turn away ineligible families and families with feasible alternative housing. By their own accounting, 47% of families that applied in FY'17 were denied in this so-called "right to shelter state". Those 4,264 families denied only include

those that completed or nearly completed their applications. We estimate that 700-1,000 families each year would benefit from this change, based on DHCD's data on families entering shelter after staying in a place not meant for human habitation plus an estimate of additional families that otherwise would no longer be discouraged from applying or continuing their application with the lifting of the current onerous requirements. With one night of shelter and services costing an average of \$130 night, this policy would have minimal impact on a line item that was funded in FY'17 at \$179.4 million after supplemental appropriations.

We can do this. For the past several years, the Senate, under the leadership of Senate Ways and Means Chair Karen Spilka, has included language in their version of the state budget that is similar to the language of House Bill 659. Representative Decker and others have filed amendments on the House side to try to adopt the language on that side, too. Unfortunately though, the budget approach ultimately has not been successful, which leads us here today. It is beyond time to remove these reprehensible barriers and take a stand for human rights, human dignity, and the welfare of children and families. If we unable to help a family avoid homelessness, we at least must provide a safe place in the interim and resources to aid families in the rehousing process. We cannot ignore the Commonwealth's responsibility to provide safe, adequate shelter to vulnerable families and expect hospital emergency rooms to serve as shelters and family members and friends (who often are in precarious and/or cramped living situations themselves) to serve as indefinite hosts for families experiencing homelessness. We cannot expect loving parents to expose their children to trauma and harm just to comply with an ill-conceived policy decision of the state. Please do all you can to swiftly move this legislation forward. We can do this... and we must do this. The children of the Commonwealth are counting us to do the right thing.

I also would like to note the Coalition's support for other legislation covered by today's hearing:

- Senate Bill 719: An Act relative to the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program
- House Bill 3014: An Act regarding homeless shelter beds for unaccompanied young adults
- Senate Bill 724/House Bill 3020: An Act relative to the economic mobility and stability program
- Senate Bill 725/House 2245: An Act relative to interagency efforts to reduce and prevent homelessness

I am grateful for this opportunity to speak with you, and to be joined here today by so many families, advocates, and other people of conscience who also will share their support of House Bill 659 and other key homelessness and housing legislation.

Thank you!

