No Place Like Home: An Act to Prevent Homelessness Among Recipients of Transitional Assistance, House Bill 2681
Lead Sponsor: Representative Denise Provost
Co-Sponsors: Representatives Linda D. Forry, Kay Khan, Peter V. Kocot

Bill Summary
House Bill 2681 would establish a homelessness prevention and early intervention program within the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) to give DTA the tools to help families and individuals remain housed.

Bill Status
The bill was reported out favorably by the Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities on July 18, 2011. The bill has been referred to House Committee on Ways and Means.

Why is this bill to provide housing stability screenings and homelessness prevention resources needed?
As homelessness and housing insecurity continue to grow in Massachusetts—and state-funded shelters are far beyond capacity—there is a critical need to expand state-funded homelessness prevention efforts to address the increasing number of families and individuals in crisis.

A key to effective homelessness prevention is to reach people “where they are”.

The Department of Transitional Assistance’s mission is to serve extremely low-income households, through its various programs, including Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC), Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled, and Children (EAEDC), and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps). These households are often those most at risk of homelessness. No Place Like Home would target resources to applicants and participants in DTA programs with incomes at or below 130% of the federal poverty guidelines. Through the No Place Like Home program, DTA staff would conduct regular housing stability screenings to assess if the families and individuals in their cash and nutritional assistance are at risk of homelessness. For households determined to be at-risk, DTA would provide stabilization services in a timely manner and link these households to other resources such as financial assistance, housing, utility programs, employment services, and child care.

Even though oversight of the family and individual shelter programs transferred from DTA to the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) in FY’10, DTA still has a central role to play in preventing homelessness. According to DTA reports at the time of the transfer, 72% of families in Emergency Assistance shelter receive cash assistance from DTA and 93% receive SNAP benefits. Similarly, significant numbers of individuals within the single shelter system rely on DTA for support. No Place Like Home would provide the structure and tools to allow DTA to identify and intervene with the households most at risk of homelessness.

There is a need for additional, targeted prevention resources for both families and individuals.

The No Place Like Home bill calls for the creation of a statewide homelessness prevention fund at DTA. DHCD’s Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) homelessness prevention program historically has run out of funding mid-year and is only funded at $260,000 for FY’12. Additionally, due to current eligibility criteria, households relying on DTA services often are unable to meet the strict RAFT guidelines. Whereas households served by RAFT
tend to have incomes above 130% of the federal poverty guidelines, No Place Like Home would target the lowest income family and individual households who are often ineligible for other resources. **If the RAFT program is expanded and redesigned in FY’13, as proposed by Governor Patrick, DTA workers could assist eligible households in accessing RAFT resources.**

There is a need for more state-funded prevention resources for individuals at risk of homelessness.

With the de-funding of the Individual Self-Sufficiency Initiative (ISSI) last decade and the drying up of the federal Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program last year, there are no statewide prevention resources for individuals who are at risk of losing their housing. This new initiative would help fill the gap by assisting individuals statewide who are at risk of homelessness.

**Resources need to be targeted to households earlier in their crisis.**

As the previous Toolbox prevention program and Flexible Funds program and current HomeBASE programs have been connected to the Emergency Assistance family shelter and services account, they have only been available to families late in their housing crisis, serving households at very imminent risk of homelessness. This makes it harder and more costly to save tenancies. Funding this and other programs separate from the Emergency Assistance line item will allow for more flexibility and earlier, cost-effective interventions.

**What else would this bill do? Increase assets to help to prevent and end homelessness.**

In addition to creating the assessment process and prevention fund, this bill also would direct DTA to create escrow accounts for families and individuals experiencing homelessness while they are participating in the Department’s cash assistance programs. Currently, households have their monthly cash assistance grants reduced if they do not have housing expenses. Under the No Place Like Home bill, these funds would be captured and directed into an escrow account to be used by the household to help in obtaining or retaining housing. For a family on TAFDC staying in Emergency Assistance shelter for an average length of stay of eight months, this would mean an additional $1,188 to help with the transition out of homelessness and into permanent housing.

**Expand Homelessness Prevention Resources and Early Intervention Opportunities for Vulnerable Families and Individuals: Support House Bill 2681!**

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