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

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

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 households 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’11. Additionally, due to 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.
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 this 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 DTA’s previous Toolbox prevention program and now DHCD’s Flexible Funds program have been funded out of the Emergency Assistance family shelter and services account, they have only been available to families late in their housing crisis, serving households at imminent risk of homelessness. This makes it harder and more costly to save tenancies. Funding this and other programs outside of 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.

Who Are Some of the People Who Could Be Helped by the No Place Like Home Program?
“Rachel” has been out of work for an extended period of time due to a difficult pregnancy with twins. While her husband has been holding down two part-time jobs and the family has been receiving TAFDC, it has not been enough to keep up with their rent and utilities. Even though Rachel is getting ready to go back to work, the family will be going to court for an eviction hearing. If Rachel’s family were able to receive emergency financial assistance through the No Place Like Home program to help them through the transition period, they could pay off their rental arrearage and avoid the eviction.

“Tamika” and her husband participate in SNAP and have been tenants in their building for several years. Now her landlord is going through foreclosure, and the bank wants to empty the building quickly. The landlord has not kept up with repairs, and apartment is becoming unlivable. Tamika has been working with a tenants’ group to learn about her rights, but needs help relocating. With housing search assistance and start-up funds from the No Place Like Home program, Tamika and her husband would be able to transition into new housing without falling into homelessness.

“Peter” is a single father who is living with a disability. He has custody of his 12-year old daughter, and receives cash assistance and SNAP benefits through DTA. Peter and his daughter are going through a no-fault eviction and are at-risk of homelessness. Peter knows that they will have to leave their apartment soon, and has been working to locate new housing and pull together the funds needed. The stress of the housing situation has been negatively impacting his daughter, as she struggles with the transition. With support and funds from the No Place Like Home program, Peter and his daughter could find a new home and avoid homelessness.