

Chandler: State Senate 'ready to go' on housing bill

By Katie Lannan, State House News Service

Posted Feb 27, 2018 at 6:16 PM

Updated Feb 27, 2018 at 6:16 PM

BOSTON - As anti-homelessness advocates poured into the State House Tuesday to make their case for more funding, Senate President Harriette Chandler said the Senate stands ready to take up a comprehensive housing bill but is opting to let the House go first.

In remarks last month laying out the Senate's focal points for 2018, Chandler, D-Worcester, a longtime advocate for affordable housing policies, called for the chamber to continue its work in that area. She echoed that point Tuesday at a Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless lobby day.

"The Massachusetts Senate, of which I am very proud to have been recently elected president, is committed to expanding affordable housing opportunities and zoning reform for everyone in the state," the Worcester Democrat told the crowd. "One of our top priorities, and certainly one of my top priorities, is a comprehensive housing bill that would lower housing costs overall, allow municipalities to require affordable housing as part of every single housing development, and provide stronger tools to prevent housing discrimination."

Asked after the event about when the Senate would take up a housing bill, Chandler said, "We're ready now. The House is writing their bill," she told the News Service. "As soon as they're done, we're ready. We're ready to go."

Chandler said she thinks "it would make sense" for the House to go first, adding, "I want to get it done."

In June 2016, the Senate voted 23-15 to pass a sweeping zoning reform bill that its supporters described as an effort to alleviate the state's housing crunch. The bill was never taken up by the House.

"We need to commit to pursuing more inclusionary zoning policies across Massachusetts cities and towns in order to help bolster the commonwealth's stock of affordable housing," Chandler said at the lobby day. "And these zoning policies can be

and should be applied across Massachusetts because homelessness is not just a Boston problem, it's not just a Worcester problem. It's a Massachusetts problem.”

At a separate Statehouse event held by the Regional Housing Network of Massachusetts, Tracey Weeden, the director of counseling and homeless services at the Worcester-based RCAP Solutions, described the demand for homelessness prevention services from outside major cities.

Weeden said RCAP recently began holding office hours in four additional locations - Athol, Fitchburg, Whitinsville and Southbridge - to help families apply for Residential Assistance for Families in Transition. Funded through the state Department of Housing and Community Development, RAFT provides short-term financial assistance to families who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

“We had some families traveling from outside the city of Worcester, which is where we predominantly offer our housing consumer education services, taking \$60 Ubers one way just to apply for RAFT, not even knowing if they were eligible,” she said. “We all know that money could have been spent on groceries, paid rent and other basic needs to live.”

Weeden said 4,215 families received RAFT assistance in fiscal 2017, collecting an average amount of \$2,587. On average, she said, RAFT yields \$38,906 in state savings for each family its assistance keeps out of the shelter system.

The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless is seeking \$18.5 million for RAFT in next year's budget, up from the \$15 million allocated this year. That level of funding would allow the state to prevent homelessness for an estimated 5,685 households, according to the coalition.

Gov. Charlie Baker recommended level funding of \$15 million for RAFT in his fiscal 2019 budget proposal.

The coalition is also asking for \$120 million in funding for the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program, an account Baker proposed funding at \$97.5 million next year.

Sen. Joseph Boncore, the Senate chair of the Housing Committee, said there is a “serious issue” with the rental voucher program.

“The MRVP vouchers are still set at rates ... of a decade ago,” the Winthrop Democrat said. “We've seen the housing market increase and boom across the commonwealth and nowhere is this more prevalent than my district, unfortunately, in metro Boston, in the city of Boston and the neighborhoods I represent.”

Lawmakers on Wednesday will again be lobbied to support homelessness services, as another group, the Coalition of Homeless Individuals, visits Beacon Hill for its annual advocacy day.

The coalition is advocating for a \$4.23 million increase in unrestricted funds for the homeless individuals line item, which would raise the funding level to \$50 million. According to the coalition, homeless individuals account for one-third of the state's homeless population, but only 18 percent of the funding for homelessness goes to support that demographic.



SIGN UP FOR DAILY E-MAIL

Wake up to the day's top news, delivered to your inbox

MOST POPULAR STORIES

