Lead Sponsors: Representative William Smitty Pignatelli and (Former) Senator Linda Dorcena Forry


Summary: An Act providing a homeless bill of rights (House Bill 695) and An Act creating a bill of rights for people experiencing homelessness (Senate Bill 46) would establish a definition of homelessness and protect key rights of all residents, whether or not they are experiencing homelessness. The bills are modeled after landmark legislation passed in 2012 in Rhode Island. Similar legislation has since passed in Connecticut and Illinois.

Bill Status: The bills were filed in January 2017. H.695 was reported out favorably by the Joint Committee on Housing and was referred to the House Committee on Ways and Means. S.46 was heard in October 2017 and was reported out favorably by the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities and was referred to the Senate Committee on Ways and Means. The bills are nearly identical to House Bill 1129 from the 2015-2016 session. That bill was reported out favorably by the Joint Committee on Housing in December 2015 and sent to the House Committee on Ways and Means. In spite of considerable support, the bill did not pass last session. We are hopeful that the momentum from last session and the pressing need to uphold human rights and dignity will propel the bills forward this session.

Why is it necessary to create a bill of rights for people experiencing homelessness? People experiencing homelessness often are subjected to discrimination and mistreatment based on their housing status. The bill of rights is a guide for state and local officials emphasizing that people experiencing homelessness are entitled to the same rights as any other resident of Massachusetts. The bill of rights seeks to outline those rights so as to prevent discrimination based on housing status. The legislation recognizes the
increased prevalence of homelessness in Massachusetts due to widespread economic hardship, the insufficient availability of safe, affordable housing, and a weakened social safety net.

“No person’s rights, privileges, or access to public services may be denied or abridged solely because he or she is experiencing homelessness.” The rights specifically included in the bill of rights are the right to move freely in public spaces, the right to equal treatment by municipal agencies (such as police departments), freedom from discrimination in employment, the right to emergency medical care, the right to register to vote and to vote, freedom from disclosure of records, and the right to a reasonable expectation of privacy of property.

The bill of rights for people experiencing homelessness seeks to have the rights outlined be treated as a statement of legislative intent, as a guide for state and municipal agencies.

Organizational Endorsers (as of December 2018):

Action Inc.                                     Homeless Youth Providers Engaging Together
Allston Brighton Health Collaborative            HomeStart
American Friends Service Committee Material Aid & Inclusion Advocacy Collaborative
Advocacy Program                                Justice Resource Institute/Youth Harbors
Arise for Social Justice                         Martin Richard Institute for Social Justice at Bridgewater
Boston Center for Independent Living             State University
Boston Homeless Solidarity Committee             Massachusetts Alliance of HUD Tenants
Boston Tenant Coalition                           Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless
Boston Women’s Fund                               Massachusetts Coalition on LGBTQ Youth
Bridge Over Troubled Waters                      Massachusetts Fair Housing Center
Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance           Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance
Children's League of Massachusetts              My Brother's Table
City Life Vida Urbana                            National Association of Social Workers-Massachusetts
City Mission Boston                              Chapter
Coastline Elderly Services                       New Bedford Homeless Advocates Inc.
Community Action Agency of Somerville, Inc.      Poor People's United Fund
Community Works                                   Roca
DIAL/SELF Youth & Community Services            Rosie’s Place
Dismas House of Massachusetts                    Samaritans Steps, Inc.
Emmanuel Church in the City of Boston            ServiceNet, Inc.
Family Promise MetroWest                          Somerville Homeless Coalition
First Baptist Church, Everett                     South Congregational Church
First Church Shelter                              Spare Change News/Homeless Empowerment Project
Gates of Hope Inc.                               Stop Bullying Coalition
The Haven Project                                 Tapestry Health
The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts   Wayside Youth
Hearts of Hope Inc.                              Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness
Horizons for Homeless Children                    Women’s Lunch Place
Housing Families Inc.                            Y2Y Harvard Square
Homeless Empowerment Project

Protect the Rights of All Residents of Massachusetts: Actively Support An Act Providing a Bill of Rights for People Experiencing Homelessness, House Bill 695/Senate Bill 46!

For more information, please contact Molly Schulman, Community Organizer/Legislative Advocate, at molly@mahomeless.org, 781-595-7570 x20 or Kelly Turley, Associate Director, at kelly@mahomeless.org, 781-595-7570 x17.