The Homeless Bill of Rights would entitle those experiencing homelessness 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.

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“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 included in the Homeless Bill of Rights are the right to move freely in public spaces, the right to equal treatment by municipal agencies, 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.

House Bill 1129
An Act Relative to Establishing a Homeless Bill of Rights

Lead Sponsor: Representative William Smitty Pignatelli

My name is Charlie. I got into a shelter this year, but I’ve been homeless since 2011, living outdoors, out in the woods. You fight the snow; you fight the rain; you fight the hurricanes; you have no place to go. It’s hard for us, especially when you have no money, no food stamps, no anything. You have to eat out of dumpsters, drink water out of the gutter, and do whatever you can. It’s a totally different world. I was married, too, and I showed my wife how to live outdoors. I was trained to live outdoors, so I have a good idea of how to survive, but a lot of people die every year.

I’m from a rich community, and nobody wants to help you. That’s the sad thing. They have plenty of money, but they won’t help you. They look at us like we don’t exist, like “Shhh! There’s a homeless person!” We don’t exist to most people because they don’t want to deal with us. Maybe they’re scared of us. There are more homeless people than you’d ever think, but you have to dig them out of the woodwork because we hide.

Everywhere the police try and kick you out. It’s public property, and I’m allowed on public property whether I’m homeless or not, so I don’t back down; I don’t move. This is the way I look at it: if they arrest me and send me off to jail, I get three hot meals and a cot, and I get medical attention. We’re dry, and we’re warm, and we’re safe, basically. Out there, you’re taking a chance because you don’t know what’s coming upon you: animals, other people, who knows? It’s a totally different world. So, to some of us, we prefer to be locked up. That’s costing the state more money when they should be trying to help us instead.

I always had a job; I was a commercial fisherman. They started making more regulations because they didn’t want us to go fishing, and then they had a thing called the buyout system—we’ll buy your boat and get you a job.” The buyout with the fishing boats happened, but the job part never did. We got stuck with nothing once again.

I’m on my way to putting all the pieces together and getting to a suitable place to live. I’ll be getting my own apartment soon and everything. I’m legally blind now, which is hard, but I’m putting all the pieces together so I can move on and end homelessness for myself. There shouldn’t be homeless people. We have to take care of each other to make our country strong. We’re just as human as they are; our blood’s still red. We have feelings, too. We don’t like living like that. We’re human. I hope this bill works out. Something has to be done!