



MASSACHUSETTS COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS

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FY'20 Budget Testimony to the Joint Committee on Ways and Means

In Support of a Key Language Change in the Emergency Assistance Line Item (7004-0101) to Prevent Families Experiencing Homelessness from Having to Stay in Places Not Meant for Human Habitation

Presented by Kelly Turley

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Good afternoon. My name is Kelly Turley, and I am with the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. Thank you for this opportunity to weigh in as you prepare the FY'20 budget. Today, we are here with our members and allies highlighting our top three budget requests. I will focus on one of them, related to Emergency Assistance (EA). We ask you and your fellow Legislators to include much-needed and overdue language in the EA family homelessness line item (7004-0101) to protect families experiencing homelessness from having to stay in places not meant for human habitation before being able to access state-funded shelter and services.

Since 2012, the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) has imposed additional EA shelter eligibility requirements that force many otherwise eligible families to prove that they **not only** are experiencing homelessness with their children, they have no "feasible alternative housing", they have not been in shelter in the past year, and they meet the income eligibility criteria set at 115% of the federal poverty guidelines, **but also that they have stayed with their children in a hospital emergency room, car, campground, Laundromat, transit station, park, or another place not meant for human habitation.** This misguided and cynical policy was set in place to artificially limit the number of families in shelter, in a self-proclaimed right to shelter state. The policy seeks to absolutely ensure that families have exhausted each and every other housing option— in practice, even unsafe housing options — before the state will provide basic shelter. It forces families to prove that their needs really are that desperate.

We ask you to include language in the FY'20 budget to prohibit DHCD from continuing this inhumane policy, and affirmatively to allow otherwise eligible families to access EA shelter before heading to stay in places not meant for human habitation. This policy change is within reach. Last session, the Joint Committee on Housing moved forward legislation filed by Representative Marjorie Decker that would make this change: An Act to protect families experiencing homelessness from having to sleep in unsafe places. (This bill was filed again for the 2019-2020 session, and is House Bill 1265.) Senate Ways and Means has included such language in the Senate version of the budget for the past three years, but each time, the provision has been eliminated in the Conference Committee. We hope that this body will work to ensure that the final FY'20 budget includes this needed language, as families are being traumatized unnecessarily and potentially irreparably harmed in the meantime. In the six and one-half years since the policy was implemented, **almost 3,700 Massachusetts families with children have received shelter only after proving that they already have stayed in places**

not meant for human habitation, including 363 families in the first eight months of this fiscal year (16% of all families approved).

Your actions to remove this requirement will not lead to a dramatic increase in EA expenses. In fact, in a program that will have more than \$171 million in expenditures this year, removing the places not meant for human habitation requirement only would add an estimated \$150,000-\$300,000 in costs to cover the extra one or two nights of shelter for these families (based on DHCD's average cost of \$150/family/night.) This would be a small price to pay to provide basic shelter and critical resources to children and families at their time of greatest need, and to shift to a more dignified, responsive program design.

I am joined today by several colleagues, advocates, and parents, who will speak more in-depth about the impact of the current practices and the urgency of requested policy change. Thank you for your consideration of our combined testimony. **We hope you will use your budget-writing powers to make meaningful changes for children and families experiencing homelessness, for their communities, and for our Commonwealth.**

With hope,

Kelly Turley

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