



MASSACHUSETTS
COALITION
FOR THE HOMELESS

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June 7, 2016

The Honorable Karen Spilka
The Honorable Sal DiDomenico
The Honorable Viriato deMacedo

The Honorable Brian Dempsey
The Honorable Stephen Kulik
The Honorable Todd Smola

Re: Support for key housing, homelessness prevention, and benefits programs in the FY'17 Conference Committee budget

Dear Members of the FY '17 Budget Conference Committee:

Thank you for your leadership in developing the state's fiscal year 2017 budget recommendations. I am writing on behalf of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless to ask for your continued support for key budget items related to housing and homelessness as the Conference Committee prepares to make its final recommendations. We ask you to please ensure that the critical programs outlined below receive adequate funding and that key line item language is included so as to better support and protect families, youth, and adults who are at-risk or experiencing homelessness. Your work to sustain these programs will help the Commonwealth move closer towards our common goal of ending homelessness.

Specifically, the Coalition is asking for your strong support on the following items:

**Residential Assistance for Families in Transition Program
(RAFT, Line Item 7004-9316)**

The Coalition strongly urges the Conference Committee to **adopt the Senate's language and higher recommended appropriation of \$13.0 million for the RAFT homelessness prevention program**. This increase of \$500,000 over the FY'16 appropriation would allow DHCD to expand access to RAFT to elders, people with disabilities, unaccompanied youth, and other households without minor children who are at imminent risk or currently experiencing homelessness. The Senate language also would ensure that not less than \$12.5 million would be used to serve families with children under the age of 21 (level funding with this year's appropriation).

**Emergency Assistance Family Shelter and Services Program
(EA Shelter and Services Program, Line Item 7004-0101)**

The Coalition strongly urges the Conference Committee to **adopt the Senate's language that would require DHCD to provide shelter to otherwise eligible families who are deemed ineligible just because they have not yet stayed in a place not meant for human habitation**. Since 2012, thousands of families with children have been forced to stay in unsafe, untenable situations to prove that they were "homeless enough" to qualify for EA shelter. In fact, in the first 10 months of this fiscal year alone, 535 families with children had to sleep in cars, bus stations, emergency rooms and other unsafe places *before* they were found eligible for emergency shelter. For the entirety of fiscal years 2014 and 2015 combined, there were at least 1,101 families in such situations before being approved for shelter. By allowing families who otherwise would be forced to stay in a place not meant for human habitation to access shelter before actually having to stay in such conditions, we can protect the safety and dignity of our most vulnerable families before they are put even closer to harm's way.

We also ask you to **adopt the Senate language that would require the Administration to notify the Legislature 90 days before implementing EA eligibility restrictions or benefit cuts**, as compared to the House's recommended 60-day advanced notice requirement. Please also **include the Senate language that expands the tracking and reporting requirements** so that stakeholders can better understand which families are denied access to EA, the demographics of families served, details on families assessed for health and safety risks by the Department of Children and Families, etc.

Thank you to both the House and Senate for your ongoing commitment to adequately funding this program, through the annual budget process and needed mid-year supplemental budgets.

Housing and Services for Unaccompanied Youth Experiencing Homelessness
(Line Items 4000-0007)

The Coalition strongly urges the Conference Committee to **adopt the Senate's funding recommendation of \$2 million for line item 4000-0007 for housing and wraparound services for unaccompanied youth and young adults through age 24 who are experiencing homelessness out on their own**, without a parent or guardian. The \$2 million in funding would be used to support the newly initiated efforts of eight regional consortia across the state to address youth homelessness and to build upon the ongoing work of the Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth. Please also include the Senate's recommended tracking language to better understand the housing and service outcomes for youth and young adults served by the programs, how many young people are denied access to these programs, and other key data elements.

Currently, the Coalition is working with a small team of young adult advocates who have experienced homelessness, the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), and the Commission to enter and analyze the 2016 youth surveys. Once that is complete, we will provide an overview to your offices. This data will provide a snapshot of the experiences and circumstances of unaccompanied youth from across the Commonwealth, and underscore the need for continued swift and coordinated action.

Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP, Line Item 7004-9024)

The Coalition urges the Conference Committee to **adopt the Senate language that directs DHCD to begin distributing new MRVP mobile vouchers on or before August 1, 2016**, so as to maximize program participants' FY'17 subsidies, minimize housing instability, and ensure that new program participants can begin their housing search during the peak season when more rental opportunities are available.

Short-Term Housing Assistance for Families
(HomeBASE, Line Item 7004-0108)

The Coalition urges the Conference Committee to **adopt the Senate language that would require the Administration to notify the Legislature 90 days before implementing HomeBASE eligibility restrictions or benefit cuts**, as compared to the House's recommended 60-day advanced notice requirement.

Thank you for the language in both versions that expands access to HomeBASE to certain families with children in domestic violence shelters and residential substance abuse treatment programs.

Alternative Housing Voucher Program
(AHVP, Line Item 7004-9030)

The Coalition urges the Conference Committee to **adopt the Senate's recommended funding level of \$6.2 million for AHVP, a \$1.6 million increase over the FY'16 allocation**. This increase would help the Commonwealth serve more individuals under the age of 60 who are experiencing homelessness or housing instability while also living with a disability.

Shelter and Services for Unaccompanied Adults At-Risk and Experiencing Homelessness
(Line Item 7004-0102)

The Coalition urges the Conference Committee to **adopt the Senate's higher recommended appropriation of \$45.3 million for shelters and services for unaccompanied adults**. This would be an increase of \$1.3 million over the FY'16 appropriation.

Home and Healthy for Good
(Line Item 7004-0104)

The Coalition urges the Conference Committee to **adopt the House's higher recommended appropriation of \$2.3 million for this successful Housing First program for individuals who have experienced chronic homelessness**. We also pleased that both the House and Senate versions would continue to fund the pilot program started in FY'14 to provide supportive housing to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender unaccompanied young adults.

**Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled and Children Program
(EAEDC, Line Item 4408-1000)**

The Coalition urges the Conference Committee to **adopt the Senate's slightly higher recommended appropriation of \$80 million for the EAEDC program** and the **Senate language that would require the Administration to notify the Legislature 90 days before implementing EAEDC eligibility restrictions or benefit cuts**, as compared to the House's recommended 60-day advanced notice requirement.

We also look forward to working with you in the final weeks of the session to move forward major improvements to EAEDC via House Bill 529, An Act relative to assisting elders and people with disabilities in the Commonwealth (currently awaiting action in House Ways and Means).

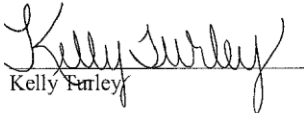
**Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children Program
(TAFDC, Line Item 4403-2000)**

The Coalition urges the Conference Committee to **adopt the Senate's higher appropriation of \$209.9 million for the TAFDC program**. We also ask you to **adopt the Senate language that would increase the annual clothing allowance to \$250/eligible child**, up from the current \$200/child, and **require the Administration to notify the Legislature 90 days before implementing TAFDC eligibility restrictions or benefit cuts**, as compared to the House's recommended 60-day advanced notice requirement.

In addition, we urge you to **adopt the Senate language that would clarify that applicants have 60 days to document their job search efforts, provide work requirement exemptions to certain caretakers, and retain key state disability standard language and allow for updates to protect the estimated 2,200 participant families headed by a parent with a severe disability**.

In closing, I want to thank you and your colleagues for all of your hard work. We trust you will keep these concerns in mind as you finalize your decisions regarding the FY'17 budget. I also thank you in advance for your consideration of these requests. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns.

With gratitude and hope,



Kelly Farley

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cc: The Honorable Stanley Rosenberg
The Honorable Robert DeLeo
Members of the Senate
Members of the House of Representatives