



**MASSACHUSETTS COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS**

Committed to ensuring that everyone has a place to call home.

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless Celebrates Passage of the  
Landmark Unaccompanied Youth Homelessness Bill**

BOSTON— Yesterday, Governor Deval Patrick signed into law groundbreaking legislation to better serve unaccompanied youth who are experiencing homelessness here in Massachusetts. The legislation, House Bill 4517: An Act promoting housing and support services to unaccompanied homeless youths, will provide the infrastructure for a coordinated statewide response to unaccompanied youth homelessness. It will do so by addressing the need for housing and supportive services for youth and young adults age 24 and younger who are experiencing homelessness outside the care and custody of a parent or legal guardian. In addition, the law ensures the continuation of the Massachusetts Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth, first established through the state's fiscal year 2013 budget.

State Representative Jim O'Day of West Boylston filed the initial version of the bill back in 2011, in partnership with a group of advocates and providers led by the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless ("the Coalition"). The bill was filed again at the start of the current legislative session in 2013 by Representative O'Day and then-State Senator (and current U.S. Representative) Katherine Clark of Melrose. The current version of the legislation gained final passage in both the House and Senate on December 31<sup>st</sup>.

"We are thrilled that the state is more deeply committing to address the unmet needs of unaccompanied youth who are experiencing homelessness out on their own. We are grateful to Governor Patrick for making the signing of this landmark bill one of his final acts as Governor. In the weeks and months ahead, we look forward to renewing our work with the Legislature, to establishing new partnerships with Governor-Elect Baker's Administration, and to expanding the network of community members engaged in the process of making sure that the promises of this law become reality for the thousands of unaccompanied youth across the Commonwealth," said Kelly Turley, Director of Legislative Advocacy at the Coalition.

Representative O'Day remarked, "The future of our Commonwealth hinges on the success of our children and our youth. Over the past four years, the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless and countless other advocates have been working to provide basic services, such as education, employment, and housing to this underserved population. Thanks to the courageous youth who came to the State House and told their stories and all of those who work on the front lines with this population, the passing of this piece of legislation is a terrific first step in addressing this burgeoning problem. I also am very grateful to Senator Clark and to Speaker DeLeo for their outstanding leadership and willingness to address this issue. The combined efforts of the Legislature and the advocates have successfully brought the issue of unaccompanied youth homelessness to the forefront and now can be tenaciously addressed."

Congresswoman Clark stated, "I'm delighted to see the unaccompanied homeless youth bill I introduced in the state legislature signed by Governor Patrick. Thousands of homeless Massachusetts teens – including the 40% who identify as LGBT – are cut off from their families and forced to make desperate choices alone on the streets. They don't know where their next meal will come from, where they will sleep, or how they will complete their education and get a job. This bill is a critical step toward ending the harm and exploitation of homeless youth and restoring options for education, health care and success. I thank State Representative Jim O'Day and all the advocates who worked for its passage, and look forward continuing this progress at a national level."

Since 2008, the Coalition has organized advocacy efforts with and for unaccompanied youth, including the 2010 creation of a statewide task team on unaccompanied youth homelessness. These efforts have involved key partners such as MassEquality, DIAL/SELF Youth and Community Services, Rediscovery at JRI, AIDS Action/Youth on Fire, LUK Crisis Center, Inc., Bridge Over Troubled Waters, Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, faith communities, schools, and youth themselves.

Val, a youth advocate from Boston, has been one of the active youth leaders pushing for passage of the bill. She said, “Until recently, I spent five years dealing with being unstably housed. Most people don’t consider going house-to-house being homeless – but when you have to bring everything you own from place to place, you lose a lot in the translation. You lose your favorite shirt, favorite pair of jeans. You lose your artwork, your journals, your books, and your make-up kit. Every time you move, something gets left behind. You have to live by everyone else’s rules, and their problems become your problems...You don’t have space to yourself – to meditate or self-reflect. You lose your stuff and you lose yourself in the process...Eventually you just become numb to all the loss. Nothing matters and you start building up walls and it’s hard to accept help.”

The newly signed law, which will take effect in 90 days, will increase options and resources to help young people like Val exit homelessness and reach their goals. The law directs the state’s Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) to enter into performance-based contracts with organizations and agencies to provide a continuum of housing and wraparound support services to unaccompanied youth who are experiencing homelessness, subject to appropriation or third-party reimbursement. The types of resources that eventually will be funded under the law may include “kinship” home placements, short-term housing, Transition to Independent Living programs, shelter, counseling, access to medical/dental/mental health care, education, employment services, case management, advocacy/referral services, and the provision of resources to meet basic needs.

The continuation of the Special Commission’s work, as enshrined in the law, will ensure that that state can build upon the Commission’s body of research and action from the past two years. The Commission, which is led by EOHHS, brings together legislators, heads of state agencies, youth providers and advocates, and young people. The Commission explores the experiences and needs of unaccompanied youth. It has been working diligently to help the Commonwealth develop and implement a plan for addressing and ending homelessness among unaccompanied youth. Thus far, the main areas of focus for the Commission have been: 1.) Identifying and connecting with unaccompanied youth (including conducting the country’s first statewide demographic and services survey on youth homelessness, with over 2,500 young people participating from across the state in early 2014); 2.) Investigating existing and needed housing and service options for youth; 3.) Addressing the unique needs of LGBTQ unaccompanied youth; and 4.) Addressing the unique needs of youth under the age of 18.

“The Coalition has been very fortunate to partner with amazing young people, key legislators such as Representative O’Day and Congresswoman Clark, and numerous non-profit organizations, faith communities, schools, and policymakers to push for this law and the creation of more housing and services for unaccompanied youth. The signing of this bill into law is an important next step toward the goal of fulfilling the pressing needs of young people experiencing homelessness. We feel a great urgency to build on this momentum, as we know that youth who are without homes right now cannot afford to wait another year for concrete actions to help them secure housing, support services, and brighter futures,” said Turley.

For more information on the Coalition’s mission, public policy priorities, and direct service programs, please visit [www.mahomeless.org](http://www.mahomeless.org). For more information on youth homelessness in Massachusetts, please go to <http://tinyurl.com/mch-youth>. To read more about House Bill 4517, please visit <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/188/House/H4517> and <http://www.mahomeless.org/component/content/article/78-mch/223-youth-bill-text-12-31-14>

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