

STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

COMMITTEE APPROVES HOMELESS BILL OF RIGHTS

By Katie Lannan

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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, DEC. 15, 2015....With the homeless rate in Massachusetts continuing to rise, a legislative committee on Tuesday advanced a bill that would establish a "homeless bill of rights" to protect against discrimination based on housing status.

Members of the Joint Committee on Housing voted to favorably recommend Rep. William "Smitty" Pignatelli's bill (H 1129), which supporters say would ensure that people who are homeless experience the same rights as all other state residents.

According to the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, the number of people experiencing homelessness has more than doubled in the state since 1990, and the approximately 3,000 shelter beds are usually full on any given night. A January 2014 count by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development found 21,237 people homeless across Massachusetts.

Kelly Turley, the coalition's director of legislative advocacy, said that establishing discrimination protections is important as Massachusetts nears a record number of people who are experiencing homelessness and housing instability.

"Some of the people that we've worked with, people are kicking them when they're down," Turley said. "They already don't have a home, and that's bad enough, but to discriminate against them when they're trying to find employment or access resources, it prolongs their stay in homelessness and makes it a more traumatic experience."

In written testimony provided by Turley, shelter residents said they faced instances of discrimination, including being told to leave parks or restaurants, thrown out of medical centers, insulted by family members and coworkers, and denied services after disclosing they were homeless.

Pignatelli described the bill at a hearing held this summer as "very simply a statement of legislative intent that will help guide agencies to promote the rights of those experiencing homelessness."

Rights guaranteed under the legislation include a reasonable expectation of privacy in personal property, confidentiality of records, voting and registering to vote, emergency medical care, freedom from discrimination in seeking or maintaining a job, equal treatment by state and municipal agencies, and "the right to use and move freely in public spaces."

The committee recommended the bill on a unanimous voice vote at an executive session attended by eight members.

A similar bill filed by Pignatelli last session was also given a favorable report by the housing committee and referred to the Joint Committee on Health Care Financing, but did not advance further.

"We're hoping that this year it actually crosses the finish line," Turley said. "While we work to prevent homelessness and end homelessness, it's critical that the people who are in that situation have their rights protected."

The housing committee on Tuesday also advanced an amended version of a resolve calling for a special commission to investigate the need for accessible homes for the elderly, disabled veterans and families including people with disabilities (H 1105). The panel also recommended Boston bills dealing with the procurement and awarding of contracts for the Whittier public housing project in Roxbury (H 3617) and the Orient Heights housing project in East Boston (S 1966).

END

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