

Bill would help homeless youth get an ID

By Diane McLaughlin For The Sun Chronicle Nov 27, 2017



A homeless camp set up at the end of the MBTA parking lot in Attleboro. March 15, 2017. FILE PHOTO
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Homeless and wandering through several area towns, a local teenager needed help. But some services and support networks required an identification card — something he could not apply for without parental consent.

Janet Richardi worked with the young man and saw the challenges he encountered without identification. Richardi is the coordinator for the South Coast Regional Network to End Homelessness, part of the United Way of Greater Attleboro/Taunton.

"It's a very big issue across the state," Richardi said. "Kids get stuck between a rock and a hard place sometimes."

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But now, activists and lawmakers want to address this issue.

A bill pending in the Massachusetts Legislature would remove barriers faced by youths and other people experiencing homelessness when applying for a Massachusetts identification card.

Kelly Turley, associate director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, recently testified in support of the bill before the Legislature's Transportation Committee. Turley told the committee about challenges homeless people face when applying for jobs, enrolling in school, accessing certain government buildings, requesting services and interacting with the police.

"Many of us take having an ID or driver's license for granted and don't appreciate the doors an ID can open," Turley said. "The consequences of not having an identification card become painfully clear very quickly for people experiencing homelessness."

The Registry of Motor Vehicles issues Massachusetts identification cards for a \$25 fee. Applicants must provide a document proving their date of birth, and anyone younger than 18 must obtain parental consent. The proposed legislation would waive the fee for someone experiencing homelessness and provide alternatives for necessary documentation.

Turley said her organization recently discussed with the Registry and the Department of Transportation ways that unaccompanied homeless youth can obtain consent. Options include social workers, teachers, shelter staff, clergy members and legal advocates who know and have helped the youths.

Twenty lawmakers have co-signed the bill, including mayor-elect and current state Rep. Paul Heroux, D-Attleboro. Heroux said he became aware of the problem more than 10 years ago when he worked at a jail in Philadelphia. He saw how inmates struggled to find housing and jobs without identification.

"If you have somebody who is homeless or an unaccompanied youth and they don't have identification, they get lost in the system — continue on being homeless," Heroux said in an interview. "It's critical that people identify who they are to get any types of services."

Heroux said the bill would also help homeless people who lose driver's licenses and identification cards. He said he has met people in Attleboro who lose ID cards as they move from one friend's house to another or sleep in cars, adding that he also has driven people to shelters.



"With that kind of chaos, some people start having to move around a lot and they lose their ID — it happens," Heroux said. "Sometimes people are down on their luck, and they slip through the cracks."

Massachusetts had more than 19,000 homeless people in 2016, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The homeless population included 374 unaccompanied youth, a category that includes young people up to age 24.

Richardi said she was not aware of any young people in the area currently experiencing difficulties obtaining identification, adding that this could change at any moment.

The local teenager who struggled to get identification eventually turned 18. Richardi said he was able to get an identification card and start receiving more services.