

Date: June 13, 2017

Location: MA State House, B2

Bill Number: H659 (Support)

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Chairman Boncore, Chairman Honan & members of the Committee: Thank you for holding this hearing.

My name is Tabitha Gaston. I am the Housing & Homeless Services director at Action for Boston Community Development, Inc.

On behalf of ABCD, I am here to speak in support of Representative Marjorie Decker's bill, *H659: An Act to Protect Families Experiencing Homelessness from Having to Sleep in Unsafe Places*. Families must be able to access Emergency Assistance *before* parents are forced to place themselves and their children in dangerous, unsafe situations to prove to the state that they really do have no other roof to shelter under at night.

ABCD is the community action, anti-poverty agency for Boston and, in addition, Malden, Everett and Medford. We provide people with Head Start, Fuel Assistance, tax preparation, job search and many more services. But the most needed service is the most difficult: helping families secure and maintain housing.

Families have already experienced many barriers to accessing Emergency Assistance when they come to our offices; most commonly eviction and/or being just slightly over income for EA but unable to afford Massachusetts' actual housing costs.

ABCD works with and runs EA "Scattered Site Shelters" for 35 homeless families in Mattapan. We also work with EA families at the Town Line Inn in Malden... and we get some 10 calls a week from families who were denied EA shelter.

While we prefer to help families remain in their current housing, Emergency Assistance shelter is a key tool ABCD uses to place children and their parents in safe settings. The state's current requirement that they must first stay in places unfit for human habitation runs directly counter to their needs and our human responsibility to help.

*At best* when families are denied shelter, they tell us they went back to their abusers or parents placed children with friends... and then slept themselves in the car. One woman dreaded that she would have to send her children back to Haiti to find a permanent roof for

their heads. I suspect far worse scenarios... but homeless parents won't tell us because they fear —if we heard the full story of where everyone had been forced to sleep— that ABCD would then file a 51A and the state remove their children.

Massachusetts has the opportunity, with H659, to prevent the horrors that families undergo before the state permits them to access Emergency Assistance shelter. As others have noted, granting them EA one night *before* rather than after they place themselves in danger will not cost the state significantly extra money. Families will sleep safe and Massachusetts will live up to its moral reputation. Please recommend this bill positively.

Thank you for listening to my testimony. I am happy to answer any questions which you have.