



**Testimony in Support of An Act Creating a Bill of Rights for People Experiencing Homelessness (Senate Bill 46)
and An Act to End Child Homelessness (House Bill 115)
Presented to the Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities
by Kelly Turley, Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, November 21, 2017**

Good afternoon. My name is Kelly Turley, and I am the Associate Director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. Thank you to Chairwoman Lovely, Chairwoman Khan, and the entire committee for this opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Coalition in support of Senate Bill 46, *An Act creating a Bill of Rights for people experiencing homelessness*. This bill, filed by Senator Linda Dorcena Forry, is the companion bill to House Bill 695, filed by Representative William Smitty Pignatelli. That bill was reported out favorably by the Joint Committee on Housing in July and is awaiting action by the House Committee on Ways and Means.

This important human rights bill would serve as a statement of legislative intent for state and municipal agencies, as well as agencies contracting with the state, to uphold the standard that no person in the Commonwealth should be subject to discrimination based on their housing status. It is based on the need for people experiencing homelessness and housing instability to have the same rights recognized as their neighbors who are living in permanent housing.

Senate Bill 46 is inspired by legislation passed in Rhode Island in 2012. Similar legislation has passed since then in Connecticut, Illinois, and Puerto Rico. The legislation would protect the rights of people experiencing homelessness here in the Commonwealth, including:

- The right to move freely in public spaces
- The right to equal treatment by state, city, and town agencies
- The right to non-discrimination in employment
- The right to emergency medical care
- The right to register to vote, and to exercise the right to vote, without a permanent address
- The right to privacy of records and property

These rights are critical at all times, but especially now when far too many of our neighbors, family members, constituents, and friends are experiencing homelessness. Currently, almost 3,600 families are living in Emergency Assistance (EA) placements¹, and an estimated 3,538 individuals are staying in adult shelters². According to the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, there were 19,608 people counted as experiencing homelessness

¹ Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, 2017: <http://www.mass.gov/hed/docs/dhcd/hs/ea/homelessnumberchart.pdf>

² Coalition for Homeless Individuals, 2017: <https://chimassachusetts.com>

on one night in January 2016.³ These numbers do not take into account the large number of unaccompanied youth for whom shelters and housing options are only just beginning to become available in a coordinated, statewide effort; the approximately 43% of families with children who apply for EA shelter but who are denied⁴; those living in doubled up and transient situations; and people who are living on the streets and in other places not meant for human habitation.

For the past twenty years, I have worked with and for people experiencing homelessness, including fifteen years at the Coalition. Over that time, I have seen discrimination against the families, individuals, and youth with whom I work, based on the fact that they temporarily are without housing. This discrimination has interfered with their ability to move forward and out of homelessness—as opportunities for housing, jobs, healthcare, and legal protections are lost unfairly.

Over the past several years, the Coalition has mobilized people experiencing homelessness and people who previously were without housing to share their testimonies in support of the bill of rights. Time and time again, these partners in advocacy have shared stories of the compounded struggles of not only being without a home, but also being discriminated against and criminalized at nearly every turn once potential employers, service providers, government officials, and others learn about the person's housing status. A mom named Christine, who came up here to the State House several times to share her experiences, noted: **“To be dead honest, I think that when people realize that you're homeless, they see it as a weakness. They see you as a weaker person, as not whole. They feel like they can treat you any way they want to, because who are people going to believe?”** By giving Senate Bill 46 a favorable report, this committee has the opportunity to let Christine and other people like her know that you believe her and support her desire to have her human rights respected, without regard to her housing status.

Outside of my advocacy on homelessness issues, I also have worked extensively over the past two decades on human rights issues—as a long-time volunteer leader within Amnesty International USA and as Board Chair for Students for a Free Tibet International. From this work, I know all too well that a statement of rights, such as this bill of rights or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, will not on its own guarantee the respect for those rights. Such statements of rights are critical, however, as they express society's values and agreed upon ideals and standards for action. A bill of rights for people experiencing homelessness, as outlined in Senate Bill 46, would move us forward toward greater respect for the rights and struggles of people experiencing homelessness, and would create a handle for mitigation when such rights are abridged.

This no-cost bill also importantly recognizes that these essential rights exist in the larger societal context of the circumstances that have led to a meteoric rise in homelessness here in Massachusetts: widespread economic hardship, an insufficient supply of affordable housing, and a weakened social safety net.

While we work together toward a full expression of housing itself as an inalienable human right here in the Commonwealth, I respectfully ask for your strong support of Senate Bill 46, so as to protect the rights of our neighbors while they are experiencing homelessness and housing instability. I ask this committee to swiftly and favorably report out this bill of rights for people experiencing homelessness, so that it has as much time as possible to make its way through the rest of the legislative process. Last session, we advocated for the bill until the final hours of the session, and we will continue to push for this and related legislation until everyone in the Commonwealth has a safe and permanent place to call home.

We also strongly support **House Bill 115, *An Act to end child homelessness***, filed by Representative Denise Provost. This bill seeks to ensure that families with children are not terminated from publicly funded shelters and affordable housing programs if they will be forced to stay in a place not meant for human habitation. The bill calls on the Department of Children and Families to coordinate with the Department of Housing and Community Development to develop and implement a plan to ensure that the families on the verge of termination/eviction will have alternative accommodations in a place meant for human habitation. It also calls on the state to make all reasonable efforts to ensure that children are not separated from their caregivers in this process. We know that far too many families are staying in locations such as cars, campgrounds, transit stations, and emergency rooms both while they are seeking shelter and housing and after being terminated from those programs. This leads to undue and avoidable trauma and safety risks for families.

In closing, I also would like to express the Coalition's support for **House Bill 2796, *An Act providing immediate childcare assistance to homeless families***, filed by Representative Marjorie Decker.

³ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016: <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2016-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>

⁴ Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, 2017: <http://www.mass.gov/hed/docs/dhcd/hs/ea/eamonthlyreport.pdf>

Thank you again for this chance to testify before you here today, on behalf of the Coalition and our statewide membership. Please do not hesitate to contact me at kelly@mahomeless.org or 781-595-7570 x17 if you have any questions or feedback.

Data from the 2016 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Point in Time Count

