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October 5, 2017

Senator Barbara L'Italien, Senate Chair  
Joint Committee on Elder Affairs

Representative Danielle Gregoire, House Chair  
Joint Committee on Elder Affairs

Senator, Julian Cyr, Senate Vice Chair  
Joint Committee on Elder Affairs

Representative Brian Ashe, House Vice Chair  
Joint Committee on Elder Affairs

RE: Support of House Bill 2077/Senate Bill 2039

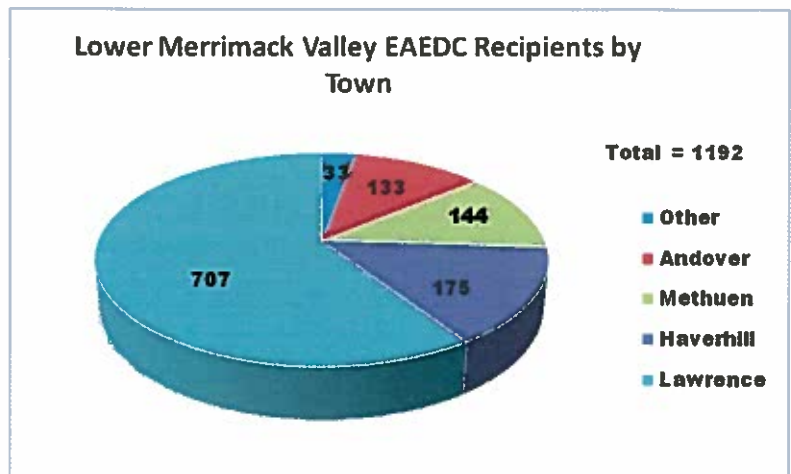
Dear Chairwoman L'Italien, Chairwoman Gregoire, Senator Cyr and Representative Ashe,

I am writing on behalf of Emmaus Inc. to urge your support for House Bill 2077/Senate Bill 2039 "An Act Relative to Assisting Elders and People with Disabilities in the Commonwealth".

Since 1985, Emmaus has helped homeless adults and children in the lower Merrimack Valley area reach their full potential by providing emergency shelter, affordable housing, adult education and supportive services. Each year, we serve over 3500 in our 13 programs which include a 30 bed emergency adult shelter serving 400 individuals annually, an emergency family shelter serving 54 parents and children nightly and a rapid rehousing and homelessness prevention programs for both individuals and families. Last year alone, Emmaus helped 284 families and 54 individuals move from homelessness into permanent housing. As a Community Housing Development Organization, Emmaus also owns and manages 97 units of affordable housing targeted to previously homeless families and individuals.

The Emergency Assistance to the Elderly, Disabled and Children Program (EAEDC) is the Commonwealth's income support program of last resort for thousands of people struggling with physical and mental health disabilities. It is usually accessed as the last step before homelessness in a desperate attempt to stay housed. People have to be truly destitute to qualify for assistance with only \$250 or less in assets. Unable to work, these individuals depend on EAEDC's monthly income and health benefits to keep a roof over their heads while addressing their medical needs and applying for federal benefits. It is also a critical first step resource for individuals making the transition from homelessness into housing. Even affordable housing programs will pass over people with no income in favor of those with some monthly income support.

Over 21,000 people a year depend on EAEDC benefits to stay safe and warm. Over 1100 of these recipients reside in the lower Merrimack Valley area.



Unfortunately, the Commonwealth has done a huge disservice to these vulnerable residents by failing to ensure that EAEDC benefits kept pace with inflation over the years. The EAEDC grant of \$303 has not been increased since 1988. With fair market rents for a studio apartment costing \$812/month in our area and rooms in boarding houses renting for over \$550/month, the current grant is totally inadequate to enable people to obtain or maintain housing. If we had adjusted the grant over the years to the rate of inflation, the monthly EAEDC payment would be \$626 today.

If passed, House Bill 2077/Senate Bill 2039 would overhaul the EAEDC program to make it the safety-net it was always intended to be. First, raising the grant amount to parity with TAFDC program benefit for a family of one (\$428/month) and eliminating the shelter penalty for those who have fallen into homelessness will give individuals at least a fighting chance of securing a Single Room Occupancy unit or a room in someone's home.

Second, by raising the asset limit from \$250 to \$2500, the EAEDC program can be used to prevent homelessness. Rather than requiring recipients to spend all their resources before they qualify for assistance, the bill would enable those facing acute and debilitating medical conditions to remain housed while pursuing treatment and /or more robust benefits under the federal Social Security or SSI programs. It can often take more than a year and two appeals before people are approved for benefits under these programs. Allowing EAEDC recipients to retain some savings and still qualify for benefits will allow them to supplement their monthly EAEDC benefit to help them cover their housing and medical costs. For some recipients this will make the difference in avoiding homelessness altogether.

Third, adjusting EAEDC benefits based on the Cost of Living will ensure that once we fix issues with the program, they stay fixed.

Finally, helping EAEDC recipients to remain stably housed while they complete the applications for federal income benefits will improve the overall success rate of those applying for federal SSI. Every dollar spent on EAEDC for someone who successfully wins SSI benefits is returned to the state to help others in need.

On behalf of Emmaus and all those we serve, I thank you for your consideration and for the anticipated support of this Committee in moving this critical bill forward.

Sincerely,



Leslie Lawrence  
Associate Director