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Speaking Out for Housing, Homelessness Prevention, and Solutions: Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless and Representative Jim O'Day to Host Legislative Action Day at the State House

BOSTON— The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless will hold its 2017 [Legislative Action Day](#) at the State House tomorrow, February 27th from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. in the Great Hall. The annual event mobilizes more than 250 members and supporters of the Coalition to take action in support of key legislative and budgetary campaigns on homelessness and housing issues, and provides an opportunity for legislators, their staff, and the public to learn more about the Coalition's work to prevent and end homelessness in the Commonwealth. State Representative Jim O'Day (D-West Boylston), the House Chair of the Joint Committee on Municipalities and Regional Government, will be hosting Legislative Action Day.

"We organize our annual Legislative Action Day to ensure that legislators and staff hear directly from constituents, including people who have experienced homelessness, faith community members, providers, and advocates, in support of key housing and homelessness programs. At the start of the current fiscal year, we saw the power of this advocacy when the Legislature expanded access to homelessness prevention resources to unaccompanied youth, elders, and people with disabilities through the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition program (RAFT). Our work to end homelessness remains far from finished, however, as housing costs continue to far outpace the ability of low-income families and individuals to afford market-rate rent anywhere in the Commonwealth, prevention resources are not to scale, and as inequality persists. Legislative Action Day will once again shine a light on common sense, needed investments and practical policy changes so that Massachusetts can make greater progress in promoting housing stability," remarked Kelly Turley, Associate Director of the Coalition.

The morning plenary session will begin with a welcome by Coalition staff and Representative O'Day, a driving force behind the state's response to the needs of unaccompanied youth and young adults who are experiencing homelessness outside the custody and care of a parent or guardian. He also is the lead House sponsor of *An Act Relative to Assisting Elders and People with Disabilities in the Commonwealth* (House Docket 2295), a bill that would improve the state's Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled, and Children program (EAEDC). Representative O'Day said, "I am happy to report that we will continue to work to ensure that the Massachusetts Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth receives adequate funding for vulnerable youth populations, such as LGBTQ youth and youth under 18 who are out on their own. We also know that there is a need to increase funding for cash assistance rates for elders and persons with disabilities under the Emergency Aid to Elderly, Disabled, and Children program, so I have refiled legislation this session to do that. We will work to ensure that our annual requests to provide safe and affordable housing are addressed this year."

The morning session will include speeches by Senator Patricia Jehlen (D-Somerville), lead sponsor of the Senate version of the EAEDC bill (currently awaiting a Senate docket number); Senator Joseph Boncore (D-Winthrop), Senate Chair of the Joint Committee on Housing; Senator Jamie Eldridge (D-Acton), lead sponsor of *An Act Relative to the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program* (Senate Bill 719); Representative Denise Provost (D-Somerville), lead sponsor of *An Act to End Child Homelessness* (House Bill 115) and *An Act to Prevent Homelessness among Recipients of Transitional Assistance* (House Bill 114); Representative Kevin Honan (D-Allston), House Chair of the Joint Committee on Housing; Representative Kay Khan (D-Newton), lead House sponsor of *An Act to Provide Identification to Homeless Youth and Families* (House Docket 2272); and Cambridge Vice Mayor and City Councillor Marc McGovern.

Legislative Action Day also prominently will feature powerful testimonies from families, youth, and adults who are experiencing homelessness and those who have recently exited homelessness. These community speakers will share their personal stories and express the importance of the Coalition's main priorities for the fiscal year 2018 state budget and the 2017-2018 legislative session, such as efforts to ensure that families at imminent risk of having to stay in places not meant for human habitation are able to access Emergency Assistance (EA) family shelter before having to put their children at risk by staying in such places. Participants will hear from Lynetta, a mother who was forced to stay in a car with her husband, daughters, and nephews before being approved for Emergency Assistance shelter: "This whole experience was really a nightmare. Our children were traumatized by the whole thing and began acting out in school. My husband and I were really scared about what would happen to us. We are all together again now in an EA shelter, the children are doing great in school, and we are working very hard to find housing of our own. I am very grateful that there is an EA shelter system to keep children and their families safe, but I hope the Legislature changes the rules so that no family has to go through what we did before they can get emergency shelter."

Lynetta will be joined by Dr. Jennifer Hoffmann, M.D. and Dr. Amanda Stewart, M.D./M.P.H., Pediatric Emergency Medicine Fellows at Boston Children's Hospital, who will speak about the increasing trend of families sleeping in hospital emergency departments and other places not meant for human habitation. Dr. Hoffmann noted, "As a pediatrician, I recognize that stable housing is crucial for the health and wellbeing of every child and family. Children who are homeless are more likely to suffer from chronic disease, malnutrition, and common illnesses such as ear infections, compared to children with stable homes. Moreover, the stress that children experience from homelessness and other adverse life experiences has been shown to impact the way the brain develops, with effects persisting into adulthood. No child should ever be required to stay in a place not meant for human habitation before qualifying for shelter. Every child and family deserves safe, secure, and adequate housing."

Dr. Stewart concurred, "Based on current housing policies, countless children and families are being required to sleep in places deemed unsafe for human habitation. Many of these families are seeking shelter in our city's emergency departments, being exposed to the chaotic and possibly distressing environment there. As a pediatrician, I'm extremely concerned about children being forced to sleep on the streets, in cars, or in our ER. The children of Massachusetts deserve better."

During the first six months of state fiscal year 2017, according to data from the Department of Housing and Community Development, 369 families were placed in shelter only after proving that they already had stayed in an emergency room, car, campground, or other place not meant for human habitation. Representative Marjorie Decker (D-Cambridge), a leader in the effort to change this policy, said, "I am grateful for the ongoing work of the Coalition in addressing the real issues of homelessness in the Commonwealth. I will continue to work with them during this coming year, particularly on legislation I have filed to eliminate the requirement for homeless families to live in situations not fit for human habitation before accessing shelter benefits (House Bill 659)." Representative Decker also filed additional legislation to create a statewide rental arrearage program to promote upstream homelessness prevention (House Bill 84).

Representative Provost will speak to the timeliness of her related homelessness prevention legislation: "The number of homeless families with children continues to rise in Massachusetts. Our state must do more to address the poverty, income inequality, and shortage of affordable units that combine to price working families out of the housing market entirely. Without stable housing, children cannot grow up safe, healthy, and able to realize their potential."

Another top priority is to build upon the FY'17 expansion of the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition homelessness prevention program to include elders, people with disabilities, unaccompanied youth, and other household types beyond just families with children under the age of 21. The Coalition is seeking a \$5.5 million increase in funding for RAFT, up from the current \$13 million allocation, to ensure that the program can more assist more households of all configurations throughout the full fiscal year to avoid or exit homelessness. Community speaker Janelle Spruill from Rosie's Place will speak to the importance of fully funding homelessness prevention efforts.

"Residential assistance and homelessness prevention remain an absolute priority for the Commonwealth," said Senator Boncore. "The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless' Legislative Action Day provides a critical opportunity for advocates to share their personal stories with legislators and emphasize the need to support these families, children, and adults in transition."

Boston resident Angela C. Jamison will share her experiences as a participant in the Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled, and Children program: "I was a personal care assistant for my veteran sister for 8 years. We lost our home in 2014 because we weren't able to find a place with accessible accommodations. My sister was placed in a nursing home, and I became homeless. When my unemployment benefits ran out, I applied for EAEDC. I thought I'd get more. Because I was staying in a shelter, I only received \$92 each month. How can we change EAEDC so that we don't add stress to people who are already disabled?...Emergency disability benefits should help people through their transitions, help them protect the things they need to protect."

"I've heard moving testimony from beneficiaries of EAEDC, reinforcing my belief that we must do more to meet residents' needs despite the state facing difficult fiscal choices. When I think of an older person trying to live on \$303 per month, or someone in shelter living on a mere \$92.80 per month, averaging less than \$25 per week, I am astounded," reflected Senator Jehlen. "As a Commonwealth, we should consider whether we offer adequate help to our most vulnerable people or whether we ask them to keep waiting another day."

Christine, a mother from Revere who now is living in Somerville, will speak to the discrimination she experienced while she was without a home and the importance of *An Act to Establish a Homeless Bill of Rights* (House Bill 695/Senate Bill 46): "While experiencing homelessness, I learned of ways to try and mask that I was homeless. I didn't carry a bag with me, because as soon as people saw you with a backpack full of belongings, they would treat you differently. As soon as you went into stores, they follow you around. As soon as you went into a Dunkin' Donuts, they assumed that you would be sitting there for hours. Simply put, they would just treat you very differently."

"We have an obligation to ensure that all residents of our commonwealth, regardless of housing status, have basic rights," commented Representative William Smitty Pignatelli (D-Lenox). "Access to housing should not determine whether you can vote, exist in public places, or if you receive fair treatment by state government. That is why I have filed a *An Act to Establish a Homeless Bill of Rights*." His Legislative Aide, Gena Frank, will address the crowd to provide recommendations on how to effectively advocate with legislators.

Representative Khan said, "As House Chair of the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities and a member of the Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth, I am pleased to be a part of the effort to bring the issues of homeless youth front and center. Working with the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, I filed House Docket 2272, *An Act to Provide Identification to Homeless Youth and Families*, which requires the Registry of Motor Vehicles to provide a state identification card to homeless youth and individuals. Having identification will enable these individuals to do everyday things such as obtaining a library card, picking up a package at the post office, applying for a job, entering some state and federal buildings, and receiving services."

In the afternoon, Coalition members will fan out across the State House to meet with legislators and staff to promote the Coalition's budget and bill priorities. The voices calling for change in the Great Hall and throughout the State House during the Coalition's Legislative Action Day will serve as a powerful reminder of the need for additional funding and resources to improve housing opportunities and support services to move toward the goal of truly ending and preventing homelessness in the Commonwealth.

"Housing affordability in the Commonwealth is one of the greatest challenges we face. It is essential that we advocate for increased funding for programs that support families and individuals experiencing homelessness, maintain access to services that keep people in their homes, and support policies that preserve and produce more affordable housing. We are grateful to the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless for organizing this event each year, and to its members for taking the time to educate legislators on the importance of investing in families and individuals when they need it the most," remarked Representative Honan.

For more information on the event, the Coalition's full list legislative and budgetary priorities, and its mission, please visit www.mahomeless.org and www.mahomeless.org/advocacy/item/2017-legislative-action-day.

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