

LEGISLATIVE ACTION DAY 2015

**Raising Up Our Voices,**Taking Action Together to End Homelessness

## For Immediate Release

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Taking Action Together to End Homelessness: The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless and Representative Jim O'Day to Host Legislative Action Day Tomorrow, March 5<sup>th</sup> at the State House

BOSTON— The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless will be holding its 2015 Legislative Action Day at the State House tomorrow, Thursday, March 5th from 9:00 am to 12:30 p.m. in the Great Hall. The annual event mobilizes members and supporters of the Coalition's legislative and budgetary campaigns, 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. Legislative Action Day, hosted by State Representatives Jim O'Day (D-West Boylston), is expected to bring together 250 people from throughout Massachusetts.

"Our annual Legislative Action Day is a key factor in the Coalition's ability to successfully advocate for programs and initiatives that will end and prevent homelessness," said Robyn Frost, Executive Director of the Coalition. "It is a wonderful chance for our supporters to speak directly to their legislators and explain why they care so deeply about working to ensure that no one experiences homelessness. The rates of families, youth, and individuals experiencing homelessness have been at an all-time high in Massachusetts. While state programs have helped those who need assistance, these programs and services simply cannot meet the increasing demand without additional funding. Homelessness affects every community in Massachusetts, and, therefore, ending and preventing homelessness should be a top priority of the Governor and every legislator."

The morning plenary session will begin with remarks by Representative O'Day, the House Chair of the Joint Committee on Municipalities and Regional Government and lead sponsor of An Act Relative to Assisting Elders and People with Disabilities in the Commonwealth (currently House Docket 2741), and Senator Jamie Eldridge (D-Acton), the Senate Chair of the Joint Committee on Financial Services. The session also will include speeches by Senator Harriette L. Chandler (D-Worcester), Senate Majority Leader; Senator Linda Dorcena Forry (D-Boston), Senate Chair of the Joint Committee on Housing; Representative Denise Provost (D-Somerville), lead sponsor of An Act to End Child Homelessness (currently House Docket 231); and Representative William Smitty Pignatelli (D-Lenox), lead sponsor of An Act to Establish a Homeless Bill of Rights (currently House Docket 691).

This year's event also will feature powerful testimonies from families, youth, and adults experiencing homelessness, and youth who have recently exited homelessness. These speakers will share their personal stories and express their support for the Coalition's main priorities for the fiscal year 2016 state budget and the 2015-2016 legislative session. One of the top priorities is \$4 million in funding for the implementation of the landmark unaccompanied youth homelessness law, An Act Promoting Housing and Support Services to Unaccompanied Homeless Youths. The funding would be used to create new housing and wraparound service resources, targeted to youth and young adults age 24 and younger who are experiencing homelessness out on their own, outside the custody or care of a parent/guardian. These investments will ensure that the state is able address the unmet basic needs of vulnerable youth, especially youth under the age of 18 and LGBT youth, and will help these young people be on the path to greater stability and success.

In addition, a panel of twelve and thirteen-year old youth from Temple Israel in Boston who were key team players in the campaign to pass the unaccompanied youth homelessness bill will inspire the crowd to take creative actions to end homelessness.

Representative O'Day said: "I am incredibly thrilled that my unaccompanied homeless youth bill was signed into law in January. Now, this year's Legislative Action Day begins the campaign to actually fund this law and see the housing and services it asks for come into fruition. There are several existing programs in Massachusetts that

have been proven to work and it is these types of effective models I hope to see replicated for youth on a larger scale, across the Commonwealth and in all municipalities."

In addition to advocacy on youth homelessness issues, the event will focus on ensuring that families at imminent risk of having to stay in places not meant for human habitation are able to access Emergency Assistance shelter before having to put their children at risk by staying in such places, as well as the campaign to increase funding for the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP) to \$100 million. The MRVP housing subsidy program is a key component of the state's affordable housing portfolio, and currently serves 6,665 households, including families, elders, and persons with disabilities. An increase to \$100 million would allow the Department of Housing and Community Development to serve 1,000-1,500 additional households with permanent affordable housing.

Other FY'16 budget priorities to be discussed at Legislative Action Day include increasing funding for the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) homelessness prevention program and the Alternative Housing Voucher Program (AHVP), the homelessness assistance for individuals program, and state-funded public housing operating subsidies; maintaining funding for the Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled and Children Program (EAEDC) and the Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC) program; and increasing transportation funding to ensure that students who are experiencing homelessness can be transported to and from their school-of-origin when they are living in temporary shelters outside of their school district.

"I would like to thank the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless for all of their hard work on advocating for families, youth, and adults in the Commonwealth," said Senator Chandler, founding member of the Massachusetts Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth. "It is critical to uphold our responsibility to identify and help those around us."

"It's critical for the public to realize that already in 2015, homelessness has already increased compared to last year," noted Senator Eldridge. "I praise the efforts of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless to end family and individual homelessness, and will be fighting hard for critical budget increases to address this statewide epidemic."

Speaking on the Coalition's bill priorities, Stacey Turner expressed her strong support for An Act Relative to Assisting Elders and People with Disabilities in the Commonwealth. The bill seeks to improve benefits for Stacey and other participants in the state's Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled, and Children program by increasing the monthly grant for the first time since 1988, instituting an annual cost of living adjustment, increasing the asset limit, and allowing individuals experiencing homelessness to receive the maximum grant level. "The current monthly maximum grant under EAEDC is \$200 short of what it takes weekly to cover market rent and food for an individual with disabilities and to avoid becoming part of the homeless population."

Representative Pignatelli commented, "Homelessness is everywhere – not just in downtown Boston, but all over the Commonwealth. I filed the An Act to Establish a Homeless Bill of Rights because I believe that all folks, regardless of their housing status, should have the same fundamental rights. This bill recognizes people without homes as who they are – members of our community, deserving to be treated with basic respect and dignity."

Representative Denise Provost added, "Increasing child homelessness is a disgrace and a disaster. The state, in many instances, is the 'gatekeeper' of housing, and should be exercising its power to stop so many of our young from the downward spiral of academic achievement, health and well-being associated with homelessness.

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 ending and preventing homelessness."

For more information on the event, the Coalition's legislative and budgetary priorities, and its mission, please visit <a href="https://www.mahomeless.org">www.mahomeless.org</a>.