

JUSTICE CENTER OF SOUTHEAST MASSACHUSETTS LLC

*Subsidiary of South Coastal Counties Legal Services, Inc.
Serving Southeastern Massachusetts, Cape Cod & Islands*

Testimony of Stephanie M. Herron Rice, Justice Center of Southeast Massachusetts, LLC in support of House Bill 659, An Act to Protect Families Experiencing Homelessness From Having to Sleep in Unsafe Places.

Before the Joint Committee on Housing

August 22, 2017

My name is Stephanie M. Herron Rice and I am a staff attorney at the Justice Center of Southeast Massachusetts, LLC focusing on housing and benefits work, including Emergency Assistance Shelter benefits. The Justice Center, a subsidiary of South Coastal Counties Legal Services, Inc., provides free civil legal services to indigent and elderly individuals in communities in Plymouth, Bristol, Dukes, Nantucket, and Barnstable Counties, as well as residents of the towns of Avon and Stoughton. Our mission is to achieve equal justice for the poor and disadvantaged through community based legal advocacy. It is in support of that mission that I come before you today, to testify in favor of House Bill 659, An Act to protect families experiencing homelessness from having to sleep in unsafe places.

As you've heard from others before me, the fall of 2012, the state implemented new rules specifically aimed at limiting the number of Massachusetts families eligible for Emergency Assistance ("EA") Shelter benefits. Although the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) often categorizes Massachusetts as a "right to shelter state" the reality is that under the rules currently in place most homeless families in our state are not eligible for EA Shelter *unless* and *until* they sleep in a place not meant for human habitation, a requirement that presents a very serious health and safety risk to all family members-especially the children. I have personally represented and been in contact with families who have had to sleep in their cars, on the streets and in emergency rooms across the state on order to be able to access the shelter system. Under the current rules, once the family has slept in a place not meant for human habitation they then become eligible for EA Shelter benefits, provided they meet the additional strict eligibility criteria. What is the point of this inhumane legal fiction?

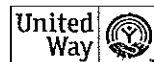
The proposed legislation, House Bill 659, would direct the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) to provide Emergency Assistance (EA) shelter to otherwise eligible families with children without requiring families to prove that they already have stayed in a place not meant for human habitation qualify for EA Shelter benefits. Based on DHCD's own numbers, the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless estimates that approximately 700-1,000 families per year will first have to stay in places not meant for human habitation before getting shelter if this bill or related budget language are not adopted. That is one thousand of our children sleeping in cars before our so-called 'right to shelter' state considers them homeless enough to be eligible for EA Shelter benefits. Rather than expanding the eligibility criteria, House Bill 659, directs DHCD to place families who would be eligible for EA Shelter Benefits but for the family having to stay in a place not meant for human habitation.

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We cannot allow this injustice to continue. I ask you to please report this bill out favorably and do your part to protect families experiencing homelessness in our state from having to sleep in unsafe places before being eligible for EA Shelter benefits.

Respectfully submitted,



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