



## **BILL OF RIGHTS FOR PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS**

**HOUSE BILL 695  
AND SENATE BILL 46**

**Lead Sponsor:**

Representative William Smitty Pignatelli  
and Senator Linda Dorcena Forry

The Bill of Rights would entitle people  
experiencing homelessness to the same rights  
as any other resident of Massachusetts



### **Testimony in Support of Creating a Bill of Rights for People Experiencing Homelessness House Bill 965/Senate Bill 46 for the 2017-2018 Legislative Session**

Over the past two years, the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless collected testimony in support of creating a bill of rights for people experiencing homelessness from Massachusetts residents who are living in shelters throughout the state. The following stories were recorded by the Coalition, with the written permission of the speakers, for the purpose of promoting passage of a bill of rights for people without homes.

#### **Testimony of Sherry Ogbudike**

I'm fifty-nine, and I've never been homeless before now. I've been close, but I've always been able to work it out due to the fact that I'm employed. I had owed my landlord a lot of money, and we had an agreement with the court, but he sold the property, and the new landlord wanted the money before the end of May. I just picked up the phone and started calling shelters.

People at work treat me differently now that I'm homeless. They've been saying things like, "Are you bringing bed bugs to work? They have bed bugs in those shelters." I haven't told everybody, but I haven't kept it a secret either. There's a faith community I belong to on Facebook, and they've been very supportive. This is a difficult thing to go through. In many ways you are moving into situations you have never been in before.

I haven't been homeless very long, but just the interactions I've had trying to find help since then have been very inhumane. I work in human services and talk to a lot of clients and people with mental illnesses on the phone, so I know how you're supposed to talk to people. If I talked to someone who called my agency asking questions in the ways that some people have been talking to me, I would be fired. You're supposed to treat everyone like they're a normal person, no matter who they are, and I think it should be the same with homeless people. Most of the people I've met at this shelter are just normal, everyday people, but they don't always get treated that way.

Part of it is a systemic problem, I think. A lot of people are underemployed and don't make enough money, so you do what you can to stay off the street, and maybe that means you get an apartment that you know you can't really afford. I make fourteen dollars an hour—that's way above minimum wage, and you can't live on that. They want to keep the poor poor and the rich rich. It's systemic, and I think homelessness stems from that problem. It keeps going around and around, from generation to generation.

I've worked in human services for probably my whole life—since I was twenty. I've worked in group homes; I've done nursing home activities; I've done different things of that nature. In the group home we do a house meeting every week, and every week we talk about a human right of the week—I did the same thing in nursing homes. We had human rights bingo, and instead of B-I-N-G-O it was R-I-G-H-T-S. We did this so people would know all of their rights—everyone else has their rights protected, and I think there should be a homeless bill of rights so people will treat the homeless with respect and dignity.

### **Testimony of Julia Saxon**

I'm homeless, and I'm tired of being homeless. I'm tired of hanging on the streets and being harassed. Storeowners harass me because I get food stamps, and not a lot of them like taking food stamps (they would rather have cash). The police harass us. So does everyone who thinks they're better than we are. When we try to hang out in a public place, the police come and tell us that we have to leave, that we can't hang out there. I've tried to hang out in parks or sit down in a restaurant, but they tell us to leave. I even tried taking a cab one day, and the driver said "We don't usually drive homeless people, so I need to see the money first." It's not fair to treat people differently because some are homeless and some are not. People shouldn't judge before they get to know a person. A homeless person could be the nicest person you ever meet. My mom always taught me, "Don't judge a book by its cover." It's a hard life. I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy.

### **Testimony of anonymous individual**

I am a single mother living in a Boston-area shelter, and I've been here for three months. I don't tell anybody that I'm homeless because once people find out you're homeless they discriminate. When you're looking for apartments and they know you've been in a shelter, you have no chance. Businesses and the government and regular people treat you differently than they treat everyone else. You have to work your way up for anyone to accept you. All we're asking for is our fair chance, and everybody deserves a chance. Everybody falls off their feet sometimes. Sometimes you go through things in life, and in order for us to fix ourselves, we need help. We need help, and we need jobs so we won't be homeless anymore. When I fill out job applications, I don't say that I'm homeless, because they do discriminate. I've seen it. That needs to change.

### **Testimony of Danielle Shlimon**

I was borderline homeless because I was in a domestic violence situation, and I did go to a shelter. A lot of people I saw in the shelter I had seen roaming the streets for years. It was very sad, and they were discriminated against. A lot of them were disabled; a lot of them can't work; a lot of them don't have families. It's unfortunate for them because they just get stuck in the system. I have seen police picking them up a lot. They are discriminated against by other people. They'll call them "bums" and "worthless," things like that. I think that's unfair; I don't think that's right. There are a lot of reasons why they are homeless, and it's not always their fault. They could have had a tough upbringing or mental illness due to what happened to them in the past. This bill would be helpful to give them more resources and just make people be more understanding.

People want to work towards a future instead of being stuck in a shelter or on the streets. That would make all the difference.

### **Testimony of Michael Kelley**

Back when I was on the streets I always made a point to dress in business casual, because people treated you differently. People I knew from shelters would get followed around in stores and things like that. At one point I had a lot of follow-up appointments at this medical center, and some homeless people would go in there because there was a homeless healthcare organization that had an office there. The security guards would throw them out unless they had a medical appointment, but if you want health care, you need to go to that office. I saw a security guard throw a guy up against a wall and say, "Get the [expletive] out of here, you homeless [expletive]!" even though he had a legitimate reason to be there.

It's always an assumption that you're homeless because you have an addiction or you're schizophrenic or something. I grew up in the projects, and people always say, "I wouldn't figure you to be from the projects." Just because I grew up in the projects doesn't mean I'm an idiot. Just because you're homeless or from a poor neighborhood doesn't mean you're a bad person. There is a pretty heavy stigma. Homelessness has been stigmatized even though it's something most people don't have control over. People say, "Oh, get a job!" Then please point me to someone's who's hiring. The harassment and discrimination are very frustrating.

### **Testimony of Roy Cahill**

There are so many shelters in Boston, and they're just overloaded. Some people don't have a choice—they can't work; what are they going to do? These people have no one. Everything revolves around getting back into the shelter. It blows me out of my mind that this is it for some people; this is life for them. They live like animals. Even if they have a room, they live like animals. Some places there are roaches, bedbugs, all kinds of [expletive]. You are at the mercy of the shelters, and then they have to end certain services because of budget cuts.

Look at all the mental institutions they closed, and look at what they turned them into—they turned them into condos. The state really just [expletive] the people. That's what I think. That's why the homeless population is so huge. The state doesn't want to handle these issues anymore. You got people going in and out of the psychiatric wards, and they are just let back on the street. There's no support for the mentally handicapped, and they end up in places like this. Or you get people that have been evicted from their homes and are living week to week, and they can't get enough money to get back into a home. Bad things happen to good people. There are a lot of sad people that don't have any help, and the state isn't helping them. We have a lot of people here today that need help, and there's no help for them.

### **Testimony of Christine Bruno**

I've been homeless since February of 2014. About a year ago, I went to the hospital because I was having severe abdominal pain. By the time they ran the testing and everything it was two o'clock in the morning. At that point I had divulged to the nurse that I was homeless, and I asked if there was an area where I could sit until daybreak. I knew she didn't have to say yes, but she was very, very sweet and said that I could stay in my room until the end of her shift, and she brought me a box of food. When her shift ended I just needed a little bit more time until it was light out and I felt comfortable leaving, so I was sitting in the waiting room. I had no

money to leave; I had no money on me at all. I explained my situation to the woman at the desk and asked if they had any T passes that could possibly help me to get me back to where I needed to go—a lot of hospitals have them, and I only had to take one bus to Revere. The receptionist's face changed completely as soon as I said I was homeless. She called somebody, and somebody came in from the back—she was some sort of head nurse, and she said, "We don't have any T passes for you." I said, "I don't know how I'm going to get back to Revere. I don't have anything. Do you have taxi vouchers, or anything that could help me?" She looked at me, and she said, "You know, if you start walking, you can get back to Revere. It's not that far." I came in with horrible abdominal pain; I'd just been diagnosed with an ovarian cyst. I was sitting there perfectly, not being disruptive. I was alone. She said to me, "You need to leave. If not, we're going to call security and have you physically removed from the building." I wasn't asking for much, and the way that they treated me was horrible. I actually filed a complaint with the hospital, and I did get a phone call back from the human resources director there. She informed me that they were going to go over sensitivity training with their staff. It didn't make it feel any better, but at least I felt like I had voiced what had happened.

It was a horrible situation, and I've had many situations like that since I've been homeless. People assume many things. I'm a single mom of three kids. I've never had a drug or alcohol addiction. I was the go-to person to help people with their kids; I was always doing things for everybody. I have a mental illness; I have bipolar disorder and PTSD. I was off my medication, and, financially, things spun out of control. I ended up losing my apartment. My ex-husband can support the kids, so rather than take them through a shelter situation, I gave him temporary physical custody. This was to shield them. My kids weren't taken away from me; I wasn't unfit. Just by virtue of me being homeless, all these people that I had helped and that I knew over the years started making assumptions about me. I've had people say that my kids were taken away from me by child services; I've had people say that I'm a drug addict; I've had people say all kinds of awful things. It's a misconception that people have: if you're homeless, you've done bad things, or you're a bad person. I was completely unprepared. I lived a very simple life. It was just me and my three kids. I was never very judgmental—or at least I didn't think I was—but I know I have a completely different perspective now. I deal with discrimination in my everyday life, even with my ex-husband. He puts me down all the time. My children were getting sick in the winter, as schoolchildren do, and my ex-husband told my kids not to kiss me. He said that I was giving them cold sores, and I couldn't kiss my own children.

That situation at the hospital was a light-bulb moment, when I realized, "Okay, I'm in a whole different life now." I went from being a PTA mom to having someone tell me she was going to remove me, when all I wanted to do was sit there for a few minutes and find a way home. The woman that I spoke to from human resources told me they do have bus passes at the hospital. Maybe that nurse had a bad night. Maybe she had seen patients before me that had given her a problem; I just don't know. 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? That's what it boils down to: someone had a bad day and thought, "This is a sure shot; this is somebody that I can take it out on, then go on about my business, and she'll go away." That day I ended up having to leave the emergency room and walk five miles, after having spent the whole night in the hospital, in the dark, exhausted, in pain, alone.

What no one understands is that everybody is susceptible to homelessness. Most people are a few paychecks away from being in the same position as me. It's been a tough time. Before I came here I stayed on the streets because I'd had bad experiences at the shelters. This is a safe, good place, so it's the first time I've actually been able to breathe in a year. I try my best; I've learned ways to try and mask that I am homeless. I don't carry a bag with me, because as soon as people see you with a backpack full of belongings, they treat you differently. As soon as you go into stores, they follow you around. As soon as you go into a Dunkin' Donuts, they assume that you will be sitting there for four hours. They just treat you very differently. It's sad, but now

I'm in a good place, and hopefully things are on an upswing for me. I hope this bill of rights can help some people like me. Discrimination is real, and it affects my life, and it's time to end it.

### **Testimony of anonymous individual**

I don't look like I'm homeless. I'm not hanging out on the streets panhandling. I've got doctor's appointments I've got to go to. I've got to go see my counselor. I have a lady friend I like to go see. I've got kids. I'm an American; I've paid my taxes since I was sixteen years old. I've paid my social security. I've done everything I was supposed to. I don't have a criminal record. I haven't had a drink in sixteen years; I haven't had a drug in sixteen years; I haven't had a cigarette in thirty. I'm homeless for the first time this year, and I'm in my fifties. Do you know how scared I am?

I believe that, because I'm homeless, I'm being discriminated against. Say this shelter was to burn down tomorrow—I've got no place to go, and I've got no income coming in. Where do I go? What do I do from here? My hands are tied. I don't know what to do, and there's no one and nothing fighting for me. I'm so far behind on my child support payments that they could come and arrest me right now. I just had open-heart surgery; I've got diabetes; I have a tough time walking; I'm sick and unable to work. I'm trying to get disability, but it's a slow process, and everybody involved—agencies, lawyers, judges—seems to be dragging their feet. I applied for a handicapped T pass, and they lost my application. I filled out another one, and now I have to wait, and I'm at their mercy. Some days I can't afford to take the T. Do you know how hard it is to humble yourself and ask your twenty-one-year-old son for ten dollars so you can get home? I get probably forty-eight dollars every two weeks to try and make something work. I've got a cell phone, and I try to pay my cell phone bill when a friend of mine will loan me some money or my mother will send me some money, but how many times can I keep going to the well? I've had great medical care, but when it comes to everyday stuff, I'm not treated fairly. I have no means of support, none at all. Thankfully my girlfriend told me about this shelter, otherwise I don't know where I'd be.

I'm not homeless because I want to be. I'm not looking for a handout. I'm not. I'm looking for a help-up. That's all. I've been knocked down, and I just need somebody to help me pick myself up. I'm not some scumbag. I want to be a contributing part of society again. I want that. How can I have that if, every time I try, I get knocked down? It's not fair. I shouldn't be discriminated against. I should have fair rights; I should have equal rights; I should have the same rights as any full-blooded American, whether I'm Black, white, straight, gay, Hispanic, from this country, or not. We should all have the same rights, regardless. This is America: home of the free, land of the brave, right? Freedom of speech? I feel if I speak my mind I'll be discriminated against. That's why I don't want to publish my name. I have a few friends that know my plight, but I don't let people know I'm homeless. You tell somebody, whether they're in the legal system or the church, and suddenly everybody knows you're homeless, and you're treated differently. Even prisoners have more rights than we do—they get three hots and a cot. They can eat. They have a place to stay. Why are we being discriminated against? It seems to me that everybody else in the world has rights, except the homeless. When you're homeless, you don't have rights.

### **Testimony of Charlie W. P.**

I got into a shelter this year, but I've been homeless since 2011, living outdoors, out in the woods. You fight the snow; you fight the rain; you fight the hurricanes; you have no place to go. It's hard for us, especially when you have no money, no food stamps, no anything. You have to eat out of dumpsters, drink water out of the gutter, and do whatever you can. It's a totally different world. I was married, too, and I showed my wife how to live

outdoors. I was trained to live outdoors, so I have a good idea of how to survive, but a lot of people die every year.

I'm from Beverly (a rich community), and nobody wants to help you. That's the sad thing. They have plenty of money, but they won't help you. They look at us like we don't exist, like "Shh! There's a homeless person!" I'm sure it goes for everybody in this shelter. We don't exist to most people because they don't want to deal with us. Maybe they're scared of us. There are more homeless people than you'd ever think, but you have to dig them out of the woodwork because we hide. People treat us like crap so we go and hide, and you never know we're there.

Everywhere the police try and kick you out. It's public property, and I'm allowed on public property whether I'm homeless or not, so I don't back down; I don't move. This is the way I look at it: if they arrest me and send me off to jail, I get three hot meals and a cot, and I get medical attention. We're dry, and we're warm, and we're safe, basically. Out there you're taking a chance because you don't know what's coming upon you: animals, other people, who knows? It's a totally different world. So, to some of us, we prefer to be locked up. That's costing the state more money when they should be trying to help us instead.

I always had a job; I was a commercial fisherman. They started making more regulations because they didn't want us to go fishing, and then they had a thing called the buyout system—"we'll buy your boat and get you a job." The buyout with the fishing boats happened, but the job part never did. We got stuck with nothing once again. They took away our trade—now what are we supposed to do? They wouldn't train us for jobs, so now you get thievery, stealing, muggings, shootings, and all that. It isn't all the fishermen, but that's where it comes from: you have to train people. I've been out of society, and now they want me to go back into society? It's really hard for us to go back and live like human beings. We've been treated like animals, so we act like animals.

I'm on my way to putting all the pieces together and getting to a suitable place to live. I'll be getting my own apartment soon and everything. I'm legally blind now, which is hard, but I'm putting all the pieces together so I can move on and end homelessness for myself. That's one less person they'll have to worry about, but something has to be done. There shouldn't be homeless people. We have to take care of each other to make our country strong. The rich want to get richer, and they want to keep the poor poor. Whatever they *are* doing to help the poor, it's not working. We're just as human as they are; our blood's still red. We have feelings, too. We don't like living like that. We're human.

I hope this bill works out. People need to try and do something—get your friends, and their friends, and their friends, and gang up on the Legislature! Something has to be done.

*For more information about the bill of rights, please check out <http://www.mahomeless.org/advocacy/item/bill-of-rights> or contact Kelly Turley at [kelly@mahomeless.org](mailto:kelly@mahomeless.org).*

