



State of Emergency to End Homelessness: Endorsing the Call to Action

Across Massachusetts, an unprecedented number of children, youth, and adults are experiencing homelessness, primarily due to widespread poverty, and an insufficient supply of housing that is affordable to the lowest income households.

Join us in calling on Massachusetts lawmakers to declare a State of Emergency to End Homelessness, and taking immediate actions to help stop the crisis! Please complete the endorsement form to let us know you stand in solidarity with our call for a state of emergency against homelessness in Massachusetts.

Call to action: Across Massachusetts, an unprecedented number of children, youth, and adults are experiencing homelessness, primarily due to widespread poverty, and an insufficient supply of housing that is affordable to the lowest income households. Homelessness and housing insecurity also are exacerbated by domestic violence, substance abuse, inequality, illness, and unemployment. According to numbers from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's 2015 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, there were 21,135 people in Massachusetts counted as experiencing homelessness during the 2015 point-in-time counts conducted by the HUD Continuum of Care across the state. We know that this figure is just the tip of the iceberg, as the HUD count is a snapshot for one day in the winter and includes only people connected to shelters and social service programs and those visibly staying in places not meant for human habitation. Families and individuals (including many unaccompanied youth) without housing of their own who are staying in temporary doubled-up situations with friends and family members are not captured in the count. Many Massachusetts residents staying in cars, campgrounds, transit stations, and other places not meant for human habitation are never captured in official counts either.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's September 2015 American Community Survey report, the overall poverty rate in Massachusetts was 11.6% in 2014. This included an estimated 757,235 people in Massachusetts living in households that fell below the poverty threshold (at the time, \$24,008 for a family of four). Families and children in Massachusetts experience poverty at an even higher rate, as 13.2% of families with children under 18 have incomes which fall below the poverty line.

Homelessness reflects the statewide housing crisis and has led to a public health crisis. Research in cities and states across America, including Massachusetts, shows that individuals experiencing homelessness are four times more likely to die of any cause than similar people who are housed. The effects are equally dire for families experiencing homelessness: housing insecurity for families is associated with poor child health and increased risk for developmental disabilities among young children, as well as less-healthy children of pregnant mothers experiencing homelessness. The way to improve the health and well-being of these populations is simple: increase the stock of affordable housing so that fewer individuals and families become homeless in the first place, and provide rapid pathways back to housing for those who have lost their homes.

For more than three decades, Massachusetts has been a national leader in responding to homelessness and housing instability. At the same time, there is much more work to be done to ensure that everyone has a safe, affordable place to call home. Taking the example from the cities of Los Angeles, Portland, and Seattle, as well as the state of Hawaii, we are asking the Commonwealth to recognize the homelessness emergency here in Massachusetts, and to take immediate and sustained action to end homelessness.

We are asking state officials to prioritize homelessness and housing programs in the FY'17 state budget by taking actions including, but not limited to:

- Expanding the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition Program (RAFT, line item 7004-9316) to continue to help families with children avoid or exit homelessness and begin to provide homelessness prevention funds to elders, adults with disabilities, unaccompanied youth, and other household configurations.

- Increasing funding for the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP, line item 7004-9024) to \$120 million to maintain existing services and benefits to the more than 7,000 households currently served by the program and to significantly increase the number of low-income households (including families, elders, and persons with disabilities) struggling with housing instability who will be served by the program.
- Providing adequate funding for the Emergency Assistance family shelter and services program (EA, line item 7004-0101) and including key language to provide shelter to families who are at “imminent risk of staying in a place not meant for human habitation”. Under current EA regulations, otherwise eligible families who are within 24 hours of staying in places not meant for human habitation can be turned away from shelter, even if DHCD believes that the family will be forced to stay in a car, emergency room, or transit station. Massachusetts can and must do better for its most vulnerable families. Between July 1, 2014 and June 30, 2015 (all of FY’15), 494 families with children were approved for EA only after first staying in a place not meant for human habitation. For the first five months of FY’16, 273 families first stayed in places not meant for human habitation before being approved for shelter (an average of 55 families/month).
- Increasing funding for housing and services for unaccompanied youth and young adults who are experiencing homelessness outside the custody and care of a parent or guardian (line item 4000-0007) to \$4 million, \$2 million over the initial FY’16 investment in this new line item.
- Increasing funding for homelessness assistance for individuals (Line Item 7004-0102) to \$50 million, an increase over the FY’16 funding level of \$44.8 million.
- Increasing funding for the Home and Healthy for Good Program for individuals experiencing chronic homelessness (line item 7004-0104) to \$3.8 million, a \$2 million increase over the FY’16 appropriation) and continuing to provide support to LGBT young adults who are experiencing homelessness.
- Increasing the number of voluntary treatment programs and beds for individuals of all incomes in active opioid and other forms of addiction, as well mental health services will prevent shelters from continuing to be indefinite holding areas for individuals struggling with special challenges and issues.

Outside of the budget, we are asking the Administration to increase coordination among state agencies tasked with addressing homelessness and poverty, and asking the Legislature to pass key pieces of legislation such as:

- An Act providing a homeless bill of rights (House Bill 1129)
- An Act relative to assisting elders & people with disabilities in the Commonwealth (House Bill 529)
- An Act to end child homelessness (House Bill 119)
- An Act relative to ensuring the well-being of all children in the Commonwealth (House Bill 429/Senate Bill 94)

Join us in calling on Massachusetts lawmakers to declare a State of Emergency to End Homelessness, and taking these immediate actions to help stop the crisis!

Sign the endorsement form online at <http://goo.gl/forms/nh8ejDLaKo> and find out more at www.mahomeless.org/advocacy/item/declare-a-state-of-emergency.