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**Massachusetts Moves Closer to Better Serving Vulnerable Youth by  
Establishing a Special Commission on Unaccompanied Youth Homelessness**

BOSTON — Governor Deval Patrick’s signing of the state’s fiscal year 2013 budget on Sunday brings some good news for unaccompanied youth who are experiencing homelessness. Under the leadership of State Representative James O’Day (D-West Boylston), State Representative Kay Khan (D-Newton), State Senator Katherine Clark (D-Melrose), and State Senator Harriette Chandler (D-Worcester), this year’s budget calls on the Patrick Administration and the Legislature to establish a special commission focused on better connecting unaccompanied youth who are experiencing homelessness with housing and needed services.

An “unaccompanied homeless youth” is a youth aged 22 or under who is without stable, permanent shelter and not in the care of a parent or guardian. While the new commission will work to get a clearer sense of the extent of unaccompanied youth homelessness, nearly 6,000 Massachusetts high school students are considered by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to be unaccompanied homeless youth. Thousands more are not reflected in these numbers, as they have finished secondary school, have already dropped out of school, or otherwise cannot be accounted for by the state or social service providers. Some of these youth have found themselves abandoned by their families after coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), announcing a pregnancy, or making a life choice their parents do not condone. Other youth have run away to avoid an unbearable home situation, such as abuse or an unstable parent; still others have found that they are without a home and on their own after aging out of foster care or other state-run programs.

Kelly Turley, Director of Legislative Advocacy at the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless (“the Coalition”), said: “Unaccompanied youth homelessness occurs across Massachusetts, affecting rural, urban, and suburban areas alike. These young people are incredibly vulnerable, given their age and desperate circumstances. Right now, there are simply not enough housing or shelter options to meet the growing needs of teens and young adults. Through the creation of this new special commission, a wide range of stakeholders from across the Commonwealth, for the first time, will work collectively to ensure safe, stable housing and access to necessary supports and services for unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness.”

The commission will study and make recommendations by March 31, 2013. The group will focus on improving access to housing and services for unaccompanied youth, with the goal of ensuring a comprehensive and effective response to the unique needs of this group as a whole, as well as for sub-populations, including youth who identify as LGBT and youth under the age of 18. The commission will be chaired by Dr. JudyAnn Bigby, Secretary of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services. The membership of this commission will consist of representatives from key executive branch offices and departments, such as the Department of Children and Families, the Department of Transitional Assistance, and the Department of Housing and Community Development; two State Representatives; two State Senators; three youth who have experienced homelessness; and multiple providers and advocates from around the state who are working on youth homelessness issues.

Representative O’Day, lead sponsor of a related bill, House Bill 3838: An Act Providing Housing and Support Services for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth, said: “It is unconscionable that young people are left to fend for themselves, without shelter or caregivers. The goal of these efforts is to improve housing and residential stability, reduce the risk of harm and improve educational, physical, and mental health outcomes for this population. I am incredibly encouraged that the House, Senate and Governor Deval Patrick have recognized this problem and have taken steps to remedy it. It is my hope that

after the Commission makes its recommendations, we can take the next step in the upcoming legislative session in securing solid funding for support services for this vulnerable population.”

Senator Chandler shared Representative O’Day’s hope: “Through the creation of a special commission, we will be able to bring together legislators, state agency heads, providers, advocates, and young people themselves to create a comprehensive and effective response to the unique needs of this population.”

“This is a great start to address some of the most egregious barriers to the safety, education, and protection of homeless youth. Fostering our young people in every community across the Commonwealth enriches our society now and in the future,” commented Senator Clark. She added, “The most vulnerable among them could one day be our most innovative leaders with the proper support. I thank the Governor and my colleagues in the House and the Senate for their far-sighted approach.”

“The youth are our future,” said Representative Khan, “and we have the responsibility to guide them to become productive members of our communities. This commission will provide stability by enabling our society to foster growth and independence amongst children who don’t have the family supports that are essential during this crucial time of development in a young person’s life. This is government at its best.”

“The Patrick-Murray Administration continues its commitment to ending homelessness across the Commonwealth, and is pleased to be partnering with the Legislature and providers to more effectively support young people experiencing homelessness. This year under Lieutenant Governor Murray’s leadership, the Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness convened a working group to identify improved strategies for serving unaccompanied homeless youth. The Commission will provide a critical opportunity to build upon that work and advance it into the future,” said Liz Rogers, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness.

According to David Voegelé, Executive Director of DIAL/SELF Youth and Community Services in Greenfield, “DIAL/SELF is thrilled to see this budget language passed. We work closely with statewide, regional, and local organizations who share our concern about the very vulnerable unaccompanied youth population. As the primary provider of services to homeless teens and young adults in the Franklin-North Quabbin region, we can attest to the need for the special commission to study these issues and recommend a course of action that will better meet the needs of unaccompanied youth.”

“In addition to the direct benefits to thousands of unaccompanied and homeless youth in Massachusetts, this will be a great opportunity for the Commonwealth to once again be a national leader in addressing pressing social issues,” said Ayala Livny, Program Manager at the AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts’ Youth on Fire program in Cambridge.

“Increasing resources for youth experiencing homelessness is critical. Without the help of drop-in centers like Youth on Fire and Bridge Over Troubled Waters [in Boston], I would have spent much more time squatting in abandoned buildings and less time preparing for a better future,” said Quianna Sarjeant, now a 23-year old college student.

To encourage the state to take those next steps for young people like Quianna who are experiencing homelessness, the Coalition and partner agencies are working to mobilize youth and young adults to attend a “Youth on the Hill” Day at the State House this winter. Participants will continue to raise awareness about unaccompanied youth homelessness and build momentum for new state investments in solution-focused housing and support services for unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness.

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