

March 25, 2020

Senator Karen Spilka
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Representative Robert DeLeo
House Speaker
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Senator Michael Rodrigues
Chair, Senate Committee on Ways and Means
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Representative Aaron Michlewitz
Chair, House Committee on Ways and Means
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Senator Brendan Crighton
Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Housing
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Representative Kevin Honan
House Chair, Joint Committee on Housing
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Re: Take action to protect children and families experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic

Dear Senate President Spilka, Speaker DeLeo, Chairperson Rodrigues, Chairperson Michlewitz, Chairperson Crighton, and Chairperson Honan:

We are writing to share with you our requests and recommendations on how to ensure the health and safety of families with children who are experiencing homelessness in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. As advocates working with and for families who are applying for and participating in the Commonwealth's Emergency Assistance family shelter program (EA, line item 7004-0101), **we ask you to take swift and decisive action to protect families from unnecessary exposure to the coronavirus**, while they are awaiting decisions on shelter applications and while they are residing in EA shelters.

Last week, we delivered the attached letter to Undersecretary Maddox and Associate Director Mullarkey at the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) to share some of our agency-specific concerns and recommendations related to shelter terminations, applications, COVID-19 protocols and information dissemination, and contingency planning. While we still are awaiting a response from DHCD during this hectic period, we know that DHCD cannot, and will not, take all of the needed steps without legislative intervention and support.

Today, we specifically call on you and the entire Legislature to:

- **Support the immediate identification, procurement, and funding of additional shelter capacity**, within and outside the EA system, to provide safe places for families to isolate if they have a confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis; quarantine if they have symptoms, have known exposure, and/or are awaiting test results; and practice physical and social distancing from other shelter residents and staff. The additional capacity may be procured in motels and hotels, or in alternative sites such as in colleges, sports facilities, empty buildings, and unoccupied housing. Proactively providing placements that allow for physical and social distancing in clean and hygienic environments is especially vital for shelter residents who are at higher risk for developing life-threatening symptoms of COVID-19, including household members who are immunocompromised or elders.

- **Ensure that families have uninterrupted access to the EA application process while DHCD has converted to a phone-only application process.** DHCD has closed in-person intake sites due to health and safety concerns, and only is taking EA shelter applications through a dedicated phone line. We are concerned that there may not be enough staffing to meet the demand. We are receiving reports from parents who have called the intake line and are unable to get through and/or have not

received a timely call back from DHCD staff. As we have raised previously with DHCD and the Legislature, a phone-only system presents additional challenges to families with limited English proficiency and limited phone minutes, especially at a time when families have fewer options for meeting directly with advocates to navigate the system alongside them and to access the technology needed to provide requested verifications. We also ask you to provide any additional funds needed to bring staffing and phone line capacity to scale, and to assist DHCD in creating access for families to quickly and securely apply online for EA.

- Ensure that DHCD honors the FY'20 budget language that requires DHCD to provide EA access to otherwise eligible families who have not yet stayed in a place not meant for human habitation. It is more dangerous than ever for families to be staying in emergency rooms and in overcrowded temporary double-up situations with family members and friends while awaiting shelter placement. We ask you to support swift passage of Representative Marjorie Decker's legislation, House Bill 1265, An Act to protect families experiencing homelessness from having to sleep in unsafe places, and add in tracking and reporting requirements to ensure accountability and transparency.

- Ensure that DHCD honors existing law that allows families to provide self-certifications when preferred third-party verifications are not easily or safely accessible, and use the presumptive placement process as a standard practice and not an exception to the rule. DHCD should use all the tools available to streamline the EA application process and connect families with needed shelter swiftly and with minimal bureaucratic barriers. This should include waiving health and safety assessments, normally conducted by the Department of Children and Families.

- Direct DHCD to suspend terminations during the COVID-19 state of emergency. No family should be terminated from EA or required to participate in a hearing related to noncompliance and termination at this time, unless they have feasible, safe, alternative housing.

- Direct DHCD to waive the existing 12-month bar on re-entering shelter to allow otherwise eligible families to be approved for EA shelter if they are facing homelessness once again during this pandemic. Public health needs and the new economic reality require the state to be flexible and compassionate.

These requests are critical to protect the health and safety of families experiencing homelessness and our larger communities.

We appreciate your ongoing commitment to addressing and ending the homelessness and housing crises in Massachusetts, and hope that these requests will be incorporated into the holistic coronavirus response emerging from the State House. Please contact us to share any questions, concerns, or feedback.

Sincerely,

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