



For Immediate Release

Date: October 18, 2016

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Working to Ensure that Families Experiencing Homelessness Do Not Have to Sleep in Places Not Meant for Human Habitation: Advocates Organize a Policy Event to Highlight Needed Changes to the State's Emergency Assistance Family Shelter and Services Program

BOSTON— Families experiencing homelessness, advocates, social service providers, medical professionals, concerned citizens, and legislators will gather this morning at 10 a.m. at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul in Downtown Boston to call for changes in the state's response to family homelessness. The [event](#) will be hosted by the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, City Mission Boston, First Church Shelter, Boston Homeless Solidarity Committee, and Poor People's United Fund.

The group and their allies are working to ensure that key language is included in the state's pending supplemental budget ([House Bill 4506](#), in line item 7004-0101) so as to change policies that require many families with children to jeopardize their health and safety by sleeping in places "not meant for human habitation" before qualifying for Emergency Assistance (EA) shelter and HomeBASE programs and services. The group hopes to convey the message to policymakers that families should have access to these state benefits before they have no other option but to subject themselves to dangerous conditions.

"No child or family should ever have to spend even one night in an unsafe or uninhabitable location," said Senate Committee on Ways and Means Chair Senator Karen E. Spilka (D-Ashland). "Unfortunately, there are heartbreaking cases where Massachusetts families have been denied shelter until they had spent a night sleeping in a car, park, bus station, hospital, or another unsafe situation not meant for human habitation. I continue to work with advocates, families and Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) staff to clarify existing rules and ensure families legally eligible for emergency shelter are never turned away."

Lynnette Martin, mother of two boys with special needs, is one Massachusetts resident with first-hand experience of the consequences of the current eligibility requirements. In recent testimony she shared with the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, she said: "I had to go into the [DHCD] office three to four times in order to have the help. They refused me. I had to be in an unfit place in order to get the help I needed. So I stayed in the car [...] for one night. Cold. In March. My children, [ages] 8 and 11, didn't have no food, no water, and they were crying." A [short video](#) of Lynnette's powerful testimony will be shown at today's event and is available online on the page linked below. In her testimony, she challenges policymakers to "experience what [she and her children] experienced" by sleeping in an unfit place.

"Today's event will be an opportunity to hear from families, advocates, and legislators on the front lines of Massachusetts' homelessness crisis. Since the beginning of July, at least 141 families were approved for shelter and benefits only after they were able to prove that they already had slept in a place not meant for human habitation, and for the 12-months before that, at least 628 families were in similar circumstances. While Massachusetts is considered a leader in providing housing and homelessness resources, we know that the Commonwealth can better serve families experiencing homelessness by providing upstream homelessness prevention services, long-term affordable housing, and — as we are highlighting today — timely access to emergency shelter," said Kelly Turley, Director of Legislative Advocacy for the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. "We are hopeful that the Legislature will include language in the upcoming supplemental budget to direct the Department of Housing and Community Development to respect the human rights and human dignity of families by providing shelter and diversion resources before families like Lynnette's are forced to stay in

places not meant for human habitation."

Rev. June R. Cooper, Executive Director of City Mission Boston, highlighted the ethical importance of a change to state's existing practices toward families experiencing homelessness, saying, "This is a moral issue ... When families have nowhere to go, they should be given a safe place, so that they can begin the difficult process of exiting homelessness."

Fran Froehlich, Co-Founder and Co-Director of Poor People's United Fund, concurs that at its base, this policy question is about a basic respect for human dignity. She said, "It simply makes no moral sense to require people who are already in dire circumstances to live in a place unfit for human habitation before they are eligible for shelter."

"It is unconscionable that the state of Massachusetts requires many families to stay in places unfit for human habitation that are unsafe and unsanitary, and put children through unnecessary trauma, in order to access emergency shelter," added Cassie Hurd of the American Friends Service Committee. "Current language requiring this must be removed so families are no longer forced to jeopardize both their physical and mental health in order to access emergency shelter."

"If you keep in mind how public officials fell over each other to welcome General Electric to Boston, it is sad and embarrassing that the Commonwealth continues to put up obstacles to homeless families seeking and deserving of assistance. Forcing homeless families into unsafe, unsanitary conditions to qualify for assistance degrades those families and shames those of us who allow it to happen," remarked Jim Stewart, the Director of First Church Shelter (Cambridge).

Representative Kevin Honan (D-Boston), House Chair of the Joint Committee on Housing, underscored the underlying housing crisis, which has led to so many families falling into homelessness: "The housing affordability crisis in Massachusetts is making it more difficult for our lowest income families to remain in stable housing. Adequately funding homelessness programs that protect families in danger of homelessness and ensuring that children have a safe place to call home is the most important work we do on the Housing Committee. We will continue to push for more resources while also prioritizing the production and preservation of affordable housing across the Commonwealth. We are grateful for the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless and everyone who advocates to do more for the most vulnerable in our state."

The event will feature testimony from a mother who struggled with homelessness; Representative Marjorie Decker (D-Cambridge), a member of the House Committee on Ways and Means and the House Committee on Housing and lead House sponsor of efforts to change the budget language and DHCD's practices; Representative Denise Provost (D-Somerville), lead sponsor of related legislation, An Act to End Child Homelessness (House Bill 119); Dr. Mia Kanak, a pediatrician from Boston Medical Center and Boston Children's Hospital; Dr. Amanda Stewart, a pediatrician from Boston Children's Hospital; and Kelly Turley.

For more information on the event, Lynnette's video, and the campaign to increase access to shelter, housing, and homelessness prevention resources, please visit www.mahomeless.org/advocacy/item/10-18-16-emergency-assistance-advocacy-event.

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