



MASSACHUSETTS COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS

Committed to ensuring that everyone has a place to call home.

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**Promoting Dignity and Opportunity for People Experiencing Homelessness:
The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless Sponsors State House Call-In Days and
Legislative Briefing in Support of Passage of House Bills 529 and 1129**

BOSTON— The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless is organizing State House call-in days for this week to push for passage of two key homelessness bills awaiting action by the House Committee on Ways and Means. The call-in days come on the heels of a State House briefing held last Thursday, hosted by State Representative Jim O'Day (D-West Boylston), Representative William Smitty Pignatelli (D-Lenox), and Senator Patricia Jehlen (D-Somerville).

Representative O'Day and Senator Jehlen are the lead sponsors of House Bill 529, An Act Relative to Assisting Elders and People with Disabilities in the Commonwealth. The bill seeks to improve the state's Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled, and Children program (EAEDC), a cash assistance program for elders, people with disabilities, and unaccompanied youth, administered by the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance. Under the legislation, EAEDC participants would see their grants increased from the current average benefit of \$304/month; annual cost of living adjustments would be implemented; participants experiencing homelessness no longer would see their grants reduced to a mere \$92.80/month; and applicants and participants would be able to receive benefits if their assets rose above \$250 but remained under \$2,500.

Representative Pignatelli is the lead sponsor of House Bill 1129, An Act to Establish a Homeless Bill of Rights. The bill seeks to create guiding principles for how municipal and state agencies and other entities treat people who are experiencing homelessness, and to decrease discrimination based on homelessness status. The bill outlines certain rights that should be enjoyed by all residents of the Commonwealth, regardless of housing situation, such as the right to move freely in public spaces, the right to privacy of personal records, the right to private property, and the right to receive medical care.

The briefing featured moving personal testimonies from Cochise W., a long-time nurse and current EAEDC program participant, and Christine C., a mother of three daughters who experienced health-jeopardizing discrimination during the time she spent without permanent housing.

Cochise testified about EAEDC and her current homelessness, "As a former nurse, I loved my job, and worked hard for 38 years and was earning \$75/hour. However, in July 2013, I finally had to stop when sciatica, arthritis, and degenerative disk disease took its toll on my body. I lived off of my savings and then applied for SSI/SSDI [federally funded disability benefits], and have been receiving EAEDC benefits since 2014. Eventually, the \$304/month from EAEDC was insufficient to help pay my rent, even while I lived with other members of my family in a market rent apartment. So, I was forced to move out because I was not able to contribute financially. People become homeless for a reason --- it's not because they are lazy. You can't stigmatize people. This could happen to anyone but for the grace of God."

Christine recounted one of several experiences of discrimination in medical settings from when she was experiencing homelessness: "In October 2015, I woke up in the middle of the night to use the restroom. My head was throbbing, I was nauseous, and I remember not being able to move my legs. The next thing I remember was grabbing the doorknob to my bedroom and collapsing, and then coming to being surrounded by EMTs...I knew there was something wrong. I remember feeling that the medics did not believe me. I remember being told that I 'looked fine now'. They were condescending, and I believe I was treated that way based on the fact that I was

being responded to at a shelter... At the emergency room, I was placed on a bed and immediately poked by needles for a toxin screening, followed by fluids and a heart monitor. An hour went by before being told that this accident was due to my blood pressure and other medications I was taking. I was given a clean bill of health. The hospital didn't believe that something was wrong. I was still physically ill, with weak legs and an achy body head to toe, yet I was still discharged."

Christine later received a diagnosis from a neurologist that she actually had suffered a stroke that night. "To be honest, I think that when people realize that you're homeless, they see it as a personal weakness. They see you as a weaker person, not as a whole person. They feel like they can treat you anyway they want to, because who are people going to believe?" she lamented.

Representative O'Day, House Chair of the Joint Committee on Municipalities and Regional Government, noted, "Year in and year out I am proud to fight alongside the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless in ensuring that we provide for the Commonwealth's most vulnerable citizens, and today was no exception. House Bill 529 and 1129 are essential in winning that fight. With only a few weeks left of formal session, we all must work together to ensure we deliver for the thousands of individuals affected by homelessness in our state."

Representative Pignatelli, a member of the House Committee on Ways and Means, remarked, "Homelessness is everywhere – not just in downtown Boston, but all across the Commonwealth, including in my district in the Berkshires. I filed the An Act to Establish a Homeless Bill of Rights because all people, regardless of their housing status, should have the same fundamental rights. This bill simply recognizes individuals without homes as members of our community, deserving to be treated with basic respect and dignity."

Senator Jehlen, Senate Chair of the Joint Committee on Elder Affairs and the Assistant Vice-Chair of the Senate Committee on Ways and Means, said, "The moving testimony I've heard from beneficiaries of EAEDC has reinforced my belief that we must take some step closer to meeting their needs even though the state faces difficult choices as revenue projections for the coming year are down. When I think of an older person trying to live on \$303 per month or someone in shelter living on a mere \$92.80 per month, averaging less than \$25 per week, I am astounded. As a Commonwealth, we should consider whether we offer adequate help to our most vulnerable people or whether we ask them to keep waiting another day."

Coalition members and allies will spend time today and tomorrow calling the offices of House Speaker Robert DeLeo and House Ways and Means Chair Brian Dempsey, to encourage House Leadership to swiftly move forward House Bills 529 and 1129.

"As the clock winds down on the 2015-2016 legislative session, the Coalition will continue to work with our extended network to elevate the stories of people like Cochise and Christine and to push for passage of legislation to improve the EAEDC cash assistance program and to create a bill of rights for people experiencing homelessness. Both of these bills are key priorities of the Coalition, in our broader work to improve housing opportunities, expand homelessness prevention resources, and strengthen support services to move toward the goal of truly ending and preventing homelessness. We look forward to continuing to work with Speaker DeLeo, Chairman Dempsey, and the full Legislature to get these bills across the finish line"

For more information on the call-in day and briefing, please follow these links:

- State House Call-in Days: <http://www.mahomeless.org/advocacy/item/house-bills-529-1129-call-in-day>
- Legislative briefing: <http://www.mahomeless.org/advocacy/item/legislative-briefing>
- Testimony from Cochise: <http://www.mahomeless.org/press/entry/cochise-s-story-speaking-up-in-support-of-the-emergency-aid-to-the-elderly-disabled-and-children-program-eaedc-house-bill-529>
- An interview with Christine, as profiled in Spare Change News: <http://sparechangenews.net/2016/04/homelessness-housing-revere-woman-shares-journey-call-action/>

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