



MASSACHUSETTS COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS

Committed to ensuring that everyone has a place to call home

Testimony in support of House Bill 43, An Act to create the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities and rename the Executive Office of Economic Development
Presented to the Joint Committee on State Administration and Regulatory Oversight
By Kelly Turley, Associate Director
March 27, 2023

Thank you to Chair Collins, Chair Cabral, and members of the Joint Committee on State Administration and Regulatory Oversight for this opportunity to testify today in support of House Bill 43, An Act to create the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities and rename the Executive Office of Economic Development.

We are grateful to Governor Healey and Lieutenant Governor Driscoll for filing this reorganization plan to elevate housing issues to the secretariat level. For too long, the Commonwealth has been stuck in a housing crisis, with hundreds of thousands of families and individuals insecurely housed and tens of thousands of our neighbors thrust into homelessness each year. The traumas of homelessness are disproportionately experienced by Black, Latinx, and other residents of color, LGBTQ folks, and newly arrived immigrants in Massachusetts.

This reorganization plan gives us the opportunity to reimagine the work currently carried out by the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) and to rescale and reprioritize its efforts to prevent homelessness, promote housing stability, address historical and ongoing racism and discrimination in housing, provide safe harbors and opportunities for families and individuals already experiencing homelessness, and uphold housing as a human right.

Homelessness prevention and homelessness intervention programs cannot be an afterthought, but must be central to the work of the new Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC.) Indeed, we call on the Administration and Legislature to ensure that under EOHLC, housing and homelessness issues receive the urgent attention and resources that are needed to serve every child, youth, and adult across the Commonwealth facing housing instability and homelessness and to promote housing justice and equity in every region of the state.

As state leaders look ahead to the launch of the new secretariat, we also call upon you to look back to the 2009 Article 87 reorganization process that moved homelessness services from the Department of Transitional Assistance to DHCD. The efforts of DHCD and staff, contracted providers, and families and individuals experiencing homelessness were doomed to fail in truly tackling homelessness because the state has not yet brought housing resources and staffing to scale and has not fully leverage the needed supports from across state agencies and partner organizations.

As the incoming Secretary uses the powers described in Section 22 of the bill to create new bureaus, divisions, and offices, we encourage them to create dedicated and interconnected bureaus for promoting housing stability, ending homelessness, and ensuring universal access to safe, affordable, and healthy housing. We call on the new Executive Office to center working with and for families and individuals experiencing homelessness and housing instability, elevating their expertise, knowledge, and insights.

We urge EOHLC to reform and refine existing DHCD programs such as Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT), Emergency Assistance shelter (EA), the HomeBASE rehousing program, the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP), and the Alternative Housing Voucher Program (AHVP) to more fully and urgently meet community needs; launch new initiatives, including programs to stem the rising tides of homelessness among older adults and unaccompanied youth; and incorporate best practices, including lessons learned during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when Massachusetts prioritized eviction prevention by enacting commonsense policies and administering generous and accessible emergency rental assistance programs.

We call on EOHLC to skillfully coordinate with sister executive offices, departments, and agencies to ensure the Commonwealth's response to homelessness is swift, holistic, equity-focused, justice-oriented, accessible, creative, and to scale.

This response must be for all Massachusetts residents. Massachusetts often is referred to as a right to shelter state, but this right only is honored for certain families with children that meet narrow eligibility criteria. We must aim higher and become the first state in the nation to consistently uphold the human right to housing, a state where everyone, including children, youth, older adults, people with disabilities, and new arrivals, can access and maintain safe, affordable, and healthy housing.

Thank you again for your thoughtful consideration of our recommendations and for your leadership on deepening Massachusetts' commitment to ending housing instability and ensuring that everyone has a safe and permanent place to call home.

If you have any questions or feedback, please reach out to us at the Coalition: kelly@mahomeless.org and 781-595-7570 x17.