

## Ending Youth Homelessness: An Interview With the Associate Director of the Massachusetts Homeless Coalition

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*Kelly Turley (second from right), Associate Director of the Massachusetts Homeless Coalition, talks to Spare Change News about the challenge of ending youth homelessness in the Commonwealth.*

On any given night in Massachusetts, hundreds of unaccompanied young adults and youth are homeless for a variety of reasons. According to the 2017 Massachusetts Youth Count conducted by the Massachusetts Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth, over 500 of 2,711 survey respondents were found to be unaccompanied young people experiencing homelessness. An additional 246 youth were found to be homeless and accompanied by a parent or guardian.

The Commission released a state plan this spring that outlines a strategy and response to the issue of youth homelessness. Kelly Turley, the Associate Director of the Massachusetts Homeless Coalition — one of the forces behind the creation of the Commission — recently shared her insights with Spare Change News and explained the barriers and possible solutions to ending youth homelessness in the state. The Coalition is currently working towards a number of public policy goals including waiving the \$25 fee for identification cards, increasing funding for the youth and young adult homelessness and creating a bill of rights for youth and adults experiencing homelessness.

### **How does the coalition define “youth”? People under the age of 25?**

Yes, the Coalition and the Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth define “youth” as a young person under the age of 25, “unaccompanied” as a young person not being with their own parent or guardian (but could be with their own child/children), and “homelessness” as being without a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.

### **Since Deval Patrick signed youth homeless legislation in January 2015, have there been any significant changes or increased services for homeless youth in the state?**

After Chapter 450 of the Acts of 2014 was signed into law in January 2015, the state has implemented the provisions of the law, and provided annual funding to create the housing and wraparound services described in the legislation. For the current fiscal year, 2019, the state has invested \$3.3 million in housing and wraparound services for unaccompanied youth and young adults under the age of 25 who are experiencing homelessness. The funds are being distributed by the Executive Office of Health and Human Services through ten regional agencies that cover the entire state. This spring, the Massachusetts Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth also released a state plan to move the Commonwealth forward in addressing unaccompanied youth homelessness.

**I know the figures are not exact — but is it still accurate to report that there are an estimated 1.7 million – 4.2 million unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness in the U.S.?**

It is impossible to come up with an exact count of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness at any given time, due to the often-hidden nature of youth homelessness and the dearth of resources in many parts of the U.S. The existing national numbers are limited, and efforts are underway to develop better estimates.

**Drawing from your experience at the Coalition, what are some common causes for youth to become homeless in Massachusetts?**

In our work directly with young people and in helping to lead the annual Massachusetts Youth Count, we see a wide range of reasons why young people experience homelessness out on their own. Some of the most common reasons are the high cost of housing, fighting with parents/guardians, being kicked out by parents/guardians, being abused or neglected, overcrowding, and parent/guardian drug use.

**Can you explain some of the policy goals for the Coalition that directly impact youth homelessness? Such as creating a bill of rights and funding for the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition homelessness prevention program? What exactly is that program?**

The Coalition is leading a number of public policy campaigns focused on and relating to youth homelessness. One campaign is to pass a bill to increase access to Mass ID cards for youth and adults experiencing homelessness by waiving the \$25 fee for an ID card and by allowing for alternative verification of Massachusetts residency. Without an ID card, young people experiencing homelessness often are unable to access shelter, housing, benefit programs, health care, etc. Another campaign has been to increase funding for the youth and young adult homelessness line item under the Executive Office of Health and Human Services. We also are working to create a bill of rights for youth and adults experiencing homelessness, as discrimination against people experiencing homelessness is widespread and compounds other types of discrimination and inequities people without housing often face: discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc. We also have worked successfully to expand access to homelessness prevention resources for youth and other households without minor children. For the third budget year, young people are able to receive assistance with start-up costs for apartments, back rent, utility arrearages, transportation, and other needs through the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition program (RAFT). This year, at least \$3 million of this \$20 million program will go to youth, elders, individuals with disabilities, and other households without minor children, with the remaining funds going to families with children under 21.

**What are some of the biggest obstacles to solving and preventing homelessness especially for unaccompanied youth?**

Currently, the resources to prevent and end youth homelessness are not to scale in any region of the state. Without having enough resources overall and too few resources that are youth-specific, many young people, understandably, do not come forward to seek assistance. Trust issues, transportation, waiting lists, and young people not knowing where to go to seek resources present additional challenges.

**Are there any goals you are particularly excited about for the coming year? Or anything specific you would want the public to know about youth homelessness in Massachusetts?**

With the expansion of state and federal funds, new investments from the philanthropic, business, and grassroots communities, and concerted efforts to forge stronger partnerships with young adults at the forefront, positive change is on the horizon. Young people are extremely resilient, and with timely and appropriate resources and supports, we can work to make sure that youth homelessness is prevented whenever possible, and if not, is rare, brief, and non-recurring.



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