

Sen. Rausch co-creates bill providing meaningful rights to the homeless

Posted Jul 23, 2019 at 5:03 PM

Updated Jul 23, 2019 at 5:03 PM

State Sen. Becca Rausch, D-Needham, and state Rep. Liz Miranda, D-Boston, recently testified before the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities in support of the Act of Living (S.76/H.150), the first-year legislators' new bill that aims to provide meaningful civil rights for people experiencing homelessness and combat discrimination based on housing status in Massachusetts.

BOSTON - State Sen. Becca Rausch, D-Needham, and state Rep. Liz Miranda, D-Boston, recently testified before the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities in support of the Act of Living (S.76/H.150), the first-year legislators' new bill that aims to provide meaningful civil rights for people experiencing homelessness and combat discrimination based on housing status in Massachusetts.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development reported that Massachusetts experienced the largest surge in homelessness in the nation, increasing 14.2 percent last year compared to a 0.3 percent increase nationwide. This increase represents more than 2,500 Massachusetts residents, and brings the total number of people experiencing homelessness statewide to more than 20,000.

Despite the Commonwealth's high rate of providing shelter to people experiencing homelessness, more than 1,000 residents remained unsheltered in 2018.

The Act of Living, filed by Rausch and Miranda, would extend anti-discrimination protections in the Massachusetts General Laws to those experiencing homelessness, including protections when seeking employment and housing, registering to vote, and accessing public spaces and public accommodations.

Nationwide, municipalities have enacted anti-homeless ordinances and arrested people for acts of survival such as resting, lying down in public, sharing food, occupying a legally parked car, panhandling, seeking shelter from the elements, and more. The bill secures these rights to those experiencing homelessness in public spaces and protects individuals from unnecessary and costly contact with the criminal justice system.

Additionally, the law repeals seven sections of the Massachusetts General Laws that criminalize homelessness.

"Massachusetts should lead on many things, but the largest increase in homelessness is not one of them," said Rausch, whose district locally includes Franklin, Millis, Norfolk, North Attleborough Plainville, and Wrentham.

"This is a complicated problem stemming from an intertwined set of social system failures, including our current crises in housing and transportation, as well as ongoing mistreatment of members of the LGBTQ community," she continued. "While our Commonwealth does not have meaningful and comprehensive solutions to the root causes of homelessness, we as a Legislature must do everything in our power to ensure the safety, dignity, and civil rights for our community members stuck on our streets. I am so proud to sponsor the Act of Living, a critical and timely bill to recognize and codify the humanity of our community members, regardless of whether or not they have a fixed and permanent address."

"Homelessness is a serious issue all across the Commonwealth, and it's on the rise especially in Roxbury and Dorchester, which I represent," said Miranda. "Just because people facing homelessness have nowhere else to go at the end of the day doesn't mean our institutions can treat them as second-class citizens. That is why I sponsored S.76/H.150 alongside Senator Rausch and hope that our colleagues in the legislature understand the severity of this issue. We must act now to extend antidiscrimination protections to all of our citizens."

State Rep. Jim Hawkins, D-Attleboro, a co-sponsor of the Act of Living, also testified in favor of the bill and discussed the homelessness crisis in the city of Attleboro.

"Right now we have people living in tents in our city, but there is no shelter space or services accessible by public transportation to serve our community members," said Hawkins. "I am proud to have secured funding in the House budget to construct a facility with emergency beds, permanent supporter housing, and physical and mental health services. However, until we construct that facility, we need to protect people while they are still on the streets."

State Sen. Paul Feeney, D-Foxborough, with support from Rausch, also secured \$50,000 in the Senate budget for the proposed 18-bed shelter in Attleboro.

Other states have adopted and implemented similar homeless rights legislation, including Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Illinois. Eight additional states and Washington D.C. are currently considering homeless rights legislation in their state legislative bodies.

Eleven Massachusetts advocacy organizations have endorsed the Act of Living, including the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, the Massachusetts League of Women Voters, and the Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ Youth.

"Many youth and adults who are experiencing homelessness face frequent discrimination based on their housing status as they search for housing, apply for jobs, try to access medical care, and move about in public spaces," said Kelly Turley, associate director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. "We are grateful for the leadership of Senator Rausch and Representative Miranda in promoting common sense legislation that would affirm basic rights of people experiencing homelessness. Such efforts, in combination with investments in housing and homelessness prevention resources, are vital to uphold the dignity and human rights of people experiencing homelessness and to increase opportunities for individuals without housing to exit homelessness and instability."

"Data has consistently shown that LGBTQ youth are significantly overrepresented among people experiencing homelessness, and face higher rates of sexual violence, HIV rates, and higher rates of poor mental health than non-LGBTQ peers," said Jordan Meehan of the Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ Youth. Even in shelters and housing, LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness report instances of harassment, homophobia, and transphobia. The Act of Living bill will provide significant additional safety measures and help reduce these disparities and protect the most vulnerable among us."