



## For Immediate Release

Date: February 26, 2018

Contact: Kelly Turley, Associate Director, [kelly@mahomeless.org](mailto:kelly@mahomeless.org), (c) [617-652-0472](tel:617-652-0472)

### **Speaking Out for Housing, Homelessness Prevention, and Solutions: Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless and Representative Jim O'Day to Host Legislative Action Day Tomorrow at the State House**

BOSTON— The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless will hold its 2018 [Legislative Action Day](#) at the State House tomorrow, February 27th from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. in the Great Hall. The annual event mobilizes more than 250 members and supporters of the Coalition to take action in support of key legislative and budgetary campaigns on homelessness and housing issues, and provides an opportunity for legislators, their staff, and the public to learn more about the Coalition's work to prevent and end homelessness in the Commonwealth. State Representative Jim O'Day (D-West Boylston), the House Chair of the Joint Committee on Municipalities and Regional Government, will be hosting Legislative Action Day.

"We organize our annual Legislative Action Day to ensure that legislators and staff hear directly from constituents, including people who have experienced homelessness, faith community members, providers, and advocates, in support of key housing and homelessness programs. At the start of the current fiscal year, we saw the power of this advocacy when the Legislature increased funding for homelessness prevention resources to support families with children, unaccompanied youth, elders, and people with disabilities through the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition program (RAFT). Our work to end homelessness remains far from finished, however, as housing costs continue to far outpace the ability of low-income families and individuals to afford market-rate rent anywhere in the Commonwealth, prevention resources are not to scale, and as inequality persists. Legislative Action Day will once again shine a light on common sense, needed investments and practical policy changes so that Massachusetts can make greater progress in promoting housing stability," remarked Kelly Turley, Associate Director of the Coalition.

The morning plenary session will begin with a welcome by Coalition staff and Representative O'Day, a driving force behind the state's response to the needs of unaccompanied youth and young adults who are experiencing homelessness outside the custody and care of a parent or guardian. He also is the lead House sponsor of *An Act Relative to Assisting Elders and People with Disabilities in the Commonwealth* (House Bill 2077). Representative O'Day said, "I am pleased to continue working with the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless to increase essential resources for families, youth, and adults experiencing homelessness. There is a serious need to increase funding for cash assistance rates for elders and persons with disabilities under the Emergency Aid to Elderly, Disabled, and Children (EAEDC) program, which the bill I have refiled seeks to address. We are committed to our annual push to increase resources and provide safe and affordable housing to those who need it." This month, the bill and its companion Senate version (Senate Bill 2039) were reported out favorably by the Joint Committee on Elder Affairs.

"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," reflected Senator Patricia Jehlen (D-Somerville), lead sponsor of the Senate version of the EAEDC bill. "As a Commonwealth, we should carefully consider whether we offer adequate help to our most vulnerable people or ask them to keep waiting another day. I hope this is the year they can finally stop waiting for this critical increase."

In addition to Representative O'Day and Senator Jehlen, the plenary session also will include speeches by Senate President Harriette Chandler (D-Worcester), lead Senate sponsor of *An Act to Provide Identification to Homeless Youth and Families* (Senate Bill 1906); Senator Joseph Boncore (D-Winthrop), Senate Chair of the Joint Committee on Housing; Senator Jamie Eldridge (D-Acton), lead sponsor of *An Act Relative to the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program* (Senate Bill 719); and Cambridge Mayor and City Councillor Marc McGovern, Convener of the Metro Boston Homelessness Summit.

Senate President Chandler noted, "The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless Legislative Action Day brings together passionate advocates and supporters to the State House each year. Their stories are a reminder to all of us that more can be done to ensure critical housing and services for families, youth, and adults experiencing homelessness."

"I look forward to speaking at the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless Legislative Action Day tomorrow, to advocate for increased funding for affordable housing, homelessness prevention, and housing production legislation," Senator Eldridge said. "Homelessness is not inevitable. It's a result of failed policies, and it's time for Massachusetts to pass bills that can put us on a straight path to guarantee affordable housing for all our residents."

Legislative Action Day will highlight powerful testimonies from families, youth, and adults who are experiencing homelessness and those who have recently exited homelessness. These community speakers will share their personal stories and express the importance of the Coalition's main priorities for the fiscal year 2019 state budget and the 2017-2018 legislative session, such as efforts to ensure that families at imminent risk of having to stay in places not meant for human habitation are able to access Emergency Assistance (EA) family shelter before having to put their children at risk by staying in such places.

Lynnette Martin, a Metro West mother of two young sons, has seen this policy up close. She was forced to stay in a car with her family before being approved for Emergency Assistance shelter. She said, "Families shouldn't be forced to go to an unfit place to get help. They should get help immediately. Like, be in a shelter. Immediately! Not just living in a car, staying in a hospital, or in the streets sleeping on a bench. If you see some staying in the streets, give them the help! After a long journey, my family and I just moved into affordable housing in Marlborough. We are grateful and all content now. My husband and I don't want other families to go through the same horror and pain our family went through, though. It is time for change. The current policy is upside down, bringing harm instead of good."

Dr. Amanda Stewart, M.D./M.P.H., a Boston pediatrician, also will speak about the increasing trend of families sleeping in hospital emergency departments and other places not meant for human habitation. Dr. Stewart said, "Based on current housing policies, countless children and families are being required to sleep in places deemed unsafe for human habitation. Many of these families are seeking shelter in our city's emergency departments, being exposed to the chaotic and possibly distressing environment there. As a pediatrician, I'm extremely concerned about children being forced to sleep on the streets, in cars, or in our emergency room. The children of Massachusetts deserve better."

During the first six months of state fiscal year 2018, according to data from the Department of Housing and Community Development, 338 families were placed in shelter only after proving that they already had stayed in an emergency room, car, campground, or other place not meant for human habitation (18% of all families approved for shelter).

Representative Marjorie Decker (D-Cambridge), the lead sponsor of *An Act to Protect Families Experiencing Homelessness from Having to Sleep in Unsafe Places* (House Bill 659), remarked: "In 2018, Massachusetts has every ability to model best practices and policies that address reducing obstacles to housing. No adult should be sleeping on the streets because of a lack of resources, and certainly no child in Massachusetts should be without safe shelter that leads to permanent housing. It's a question of motivation and priorities." Representative Decker also is the lead sponsor of other bills on the Coalition's priority list to create a statewide rental arrearage program to promote upstream homelessness prevention (*An Act to Further Provide a Rental Arrearage Program*, House Bill 84), and to increase cash assistance benefits for families with children (*An Act Relative to the Well Being and Care of a Child*, House Bill 85).

Representative Denise Provost (D-Somerville) noted the importance of passing related homelessness prevention legislation she sponsored, *An Act to End Child Homelessness* (House Bill 115) and *An Act to Prevent Homelessness among Recipients of Transitional Assistance* (House Bill 114): "The number of homeless families with children continues to rise in Massachusetts. Our state must do more to address the poverty, income inequality, and shortage of affordable units that combine to price working families out of the housing market entirely. Without stable housing, children cannot grow up safe, healthy, and able to realize their potential."

Participants also will be asking legislators to make deeper investments to address and end youth and young adult homelessness. Maxwell Nashashuk, a youth activist and advocate who is working with the Coalition to secure \$4 million in the upcoming state budget to support housing and wraparound services for LGBTQ youth and other young adults, will speak: "I am not only homeless. I am strong, resilient, and will fight every step of the way. The more you treat me as sub-human, the stronger I will fight back. Recognize me, my friends, and my family. Help us, and you will learn how resilient we all are!"

Another top priority of the Coalition is to build upon the recent expansion of the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition homelessness prevention program to include elders, people with disabilities, unaccompanied youth, and other household types beyond just families with children under the age of 21. The Coalition is seeking a \$3.5 million increase in funding for RAFT, up from the current \$15 million allocation, to ensure that the program can more assist more households of all configurations throughout the full fiscal year to avoid or exit homelessness.

"We are *you*, your neighbors, your lawn guy, your mechanic -- your professors. We are good people who have the same hopes and dreams for ourselves and our loved ones as you do. Often, we are simultaneously working *and* homeless. Most of all we are people who have been submerged in the pain of misfortune, some of us since before the time of remembering (yes, you can be born into homelessness as easily as you are born into wealth). The RAFT program gives people a foothold so that we might continue leading purposeful, rewarding lives. I know homeless folks who are better read than the Ph.D.'s wandering the halls at the universities where I teach," said Julie Batten, Founding Director of the Glass House Shelter Project.

"Residential assistance and homelessness prevention remain an absolute priority for the Commonwealth," said Senator Boncore. "The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless' Legislative Action Day provides a critical opportunity for advocates to share their personal stories with legislators and emphasize the need to support these families, children, and adults in transition."

"The lack of affordable housing affects all of us as a community. By preserving the affordable housing we have now, building new housing that will work for families in the future, and continuing to fund programs that help families in crisis, I think we can make our community stronger. One of the most important issues Senator Boncore and I work on is securing funding in the annual state budget to support programs that help homeless individuals and families. We are grateful to the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless for their advocacy and expertise as we work to reduce the number of people facing homelessness in our state," remarked Representative Kevin Honan (D-Allston), House Chair of the Joint Committee on Housing.

Representative Byron Rushing (D-Boston), a State House leader on homelessness issues, expressed his solidarity and support for the Coalition and the Legislative Action Day participants: "The only goal, the only definition of success for this Coalition of advocates is permanent, decent, affordable housing for every resident of Massachusetts. Although we continue to see expansions toward this goal, it is too slow. The struggle for housing first for all remains one of the most frustrating public policy reforms in my career. I stand with you all as we re-double our efforts for housing justice for all."

In the afternoon, Coalition members will fan out across the State House to meet with legislators and staff to promote the Coalition's budget and bill priorities. The voices calling for change in the Great Hall and throughout the State House during the Coalition's Legislative Action Day will serve as a powerful reminder of the need for additional funding and resources to improve housing opportunities and support services to move toward the goal of truly ending and preventing homelessness in the Commonwealth.

For more information on the event, the Coalition's full list legislative and budgetary priorities, and its mission, please visit [www.mahomeless.org](http://www.mahomeless.org) and [www.mahomeless.org/advocacy/item/legislative-action-day-2018](http://www.mahomeless.org/advocacy/item/legislative-action-day-2018).

###