



MASSACHUSETTS COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS

Committed to ensuring that everyone has a place to call home

Testimony in Support of Key Investments and Language in the Fiscal Year 2024 State Budget to Prevent and End Homelessness

Prepared for the Joint Committee on Ways and Means

By Kelly Turley, Associate Director and Julia Garvey, Community Organizer/Legislative Advocate
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Thank you to the Committee Chairs, Senator Rodrigues and Representative Michelwitz; the hearing chairs, Senator Miranda and Representative Ferrante; and the members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means for this opportunity to testify today along with our colleagues from the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute in support of key investments and language in the FY24 state budget to prevent and end homelessness and to increase equity and access to critical resources.

As the Commonwealth continues to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, Massachusetts remains 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, older adults, unaccompanied youth, and newly arrived immigrants in Massachusetts.

The FY24 budget provides us with an opportunity to rescale and reprioritize our 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.

As highlighted in our oral testimony, we would like to focus our written testimony on six key homelessness prevention, housing, shelter, and benefits programs.

Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT, Line Item 7004-9316):

We urge you to increase funding for the RAFT program to \$250 million in FY24 and expand access to upstream homelessness prevention resources. To move the benefits upstream, we ask you to include language that would prohibit the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), or the anticipated successor Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities, from imposing a notice to quit requirement. Such language would overturn the policy DHCD implemented in August 2022, which has pushed households deeper into an eviction process before they can become eligible for RAFT assistance.

We also ask you to increase the cap on RAFT grants or at least maintain the current cap of \$10,000 over 12 months, rejecting Governor Healey's House 1 budget proposal to reduce RAFT benefits to \$7,000 over 24 months. Such actions are especially critical for larger households and families and individuals in particularly high-cost areas. We also ask you to include language to allow for flexible combinations of assistance with rental arrearages and forward rent, removing DHCD's current arbitrary limitation of one month of forward rent assistance. DHCD currently only provides forward rent assistance to households already behind on their rent. In addition, we ask you to do all you can to

streamline the application process and allow renters to access funds even if the property owner is not cooperative with the RAFT application process, as was the practice under the related federal Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP.)

We were thrilled and grateful to hear today's news that the House intends to recommend the restoration of the related Chapter 257 eviction protections in their version of the budget. We implore the Senate to do the same, and to explore additional vehicles within the Legislature and the Courts for restoring these protections before the July 1st start of FY24.

Emergency Assistance (EA, Line Item 7004-0101 and the related administrative account, Line Item 7004-0099):

We call upon you to adequately fund and protect emergency shelter and service programs for children and families experiencing homelessness by providing at least \$325 million for the Emergency Assistance program in FY24 to serve the growing number of children and parents, including newly arrived immigrant families, facing homelessness.

We urge you to increase the income eligibility limit from 115% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines (FPG) to 200% FPG for Emergency Assistance applicants, and increase the income limit for families already in EA shelter from 200% FPG to 285% FPG (while also maintaining the over-income grace period.) This would allow more working families to access and maintain desperately needed shelter and supports.

We also encourage you to restore FY22 language to create an ombudsperson unit under the anticipated new Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities with dedicated staff to address the wide array of issues and concerns from families applying for and participating in the EA and HomeBASE programs. We also ask you to invest in the staffing and technology needed to ensure timely access to critical shelter benefits for children and parents.

HomeBASE Program (a.k.a. Massachusetts Short-Term Housing Transition Program, Line Item 7004-0108):

We ask you to increase funding and to build on FY23 changes to provide easier renewals for families participating in the HomeBASE rehousing program. We are requesting at least \$60 million in FY24 to continue payments to households currently enrolled in HomeBASE that need an extension and to enroll new households in both the diversion and shelter exit components of HomeBASE. We ask you to continue FY23 language that allows eligible families to receive at least two years of HomeBASE benefits, with new language to explicitly allow families to further extend HomeBASE in twelve-month increments to avoid a return to homelessness.

To expand the usefulness and geographic range of the program, we ask you to increase HomeBASE payments from \$20,000 over two years to \$30,000 over two years with the possibility of \$15,000 for additional years for otherwise eligible families. We also are seeking additional flexibility for DHCD or the anticipated successor Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities to address the needs of larger families, families in areas with higher rents, and families with disabilities. This increase and new flexibility would better match the realities of the Commonwealth's rental markets, at a time when the National Low Income Housing Coalition ranks Massachusetts as the third least affordable state in the nation for renters. Finally, we also ask you to include unambiguous language to lift the income eligibility and asset limits for families after they enroll in HomeBASE to allow families to maximize their income

without fear of the cliff effect.

Establish a bridge subsidy program for older adults facing housing instability while awaiting longer term housing supports (Line Item 9110-XXXX) and increase cash assistance benefits for older adults and people with disabilities (Line Item 4408-1000):

According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, homelessness among older adults in the United States is expected to nearly triple by 2030. As the incomes of low-income older adults stay stagnant, rising housing costs continue to displace older folks from their homes. We call upon the Legislature to provide \$10 million in FY24 to create bridge subsidies for up to 1,000 older adults facing housing instability to allow them to remain in place while they await approval for state-funded public housing or a subsidy through the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program.

To offset the rising costs of housing and basic needs, we also ask you to increase monthly cash assistance payments under the Department of Transitional Assistance's Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled, and Children program (EAEDC) by 20%.

With the creation of a bridge subsidy program and increased EAEDC payments, fewer older adults will be on the pathway to experiencing homelessness.

Housing and wraparound support services for unaccompanied youth and young adults who are experiencing homelessness (Line Item 4000-0007):

Last spring, the Massachusetts Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth conducted the 2022 Massachusetts Youth Count. While the percentage of unaccompanied youth and young adults under the age of 24 in shelters, transitional housing, or hotels decreased, the percentage of youth and young adults who were on the street and other spaces not meant for human habitation was 38% higher than pre-pandemic levels. Additionally, only 23% of respondents received the help they needed and deserved when seeking out shelter and transitional housing, revealing the lack of support systems in place for youth. Therefore, we are asking the Legislature to make a deeper commitment to address the needs of unaccompanied youth and young adults who are experiencing homelessness by increasing funding to at least \$12 million for housing and wraparound support services under the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) youth and young adult homelessness program. This would be an increase from the FY23 funding level of \$9.5 million.

Funds would be available for EOHHS to use flexibly for housing, wraparound services, educational resources, and supports for young people experiencing homelessness without a parent or guardian; continuing the work to build up regional Youth Action Boards; and expanding access to underserved young people, especially young people who identify as Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and/or LGBTQ+.

We have attached our longer list of budget priorities to this testimony.

By enacting a strong FY24 budget with the investments and language requested by this panel, we can help ensure that the Commonwealth's response to homelessness is swift, holistic, equity-focused, justice-oriented, accessible, creative, and to scale.

Thank you 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 or 781-595-7570 x17.