

July 10, 2019

Senator Brendan Crighton
Senate Chair
Joint Committee on Housing
State House, Room 520

Representative Kevin Honan
House Chair
Joint Committee on Housing
State House, Room 38

Re: S. 2785 An Act Promoting Housing Stability and Homelessness Prevention through a Right to Counsel Pilot Program in Massachusetts in Response to the COVID Emergency

Dear Chair Eldridge and Chair Cronin:

I am pleased to submit this testimony on behalf of the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness in support of the Right to Counsel Pilot Program in Response to the COVID Emergency and to request a favorable report out of your Committee.

The Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness (“Network”) supports collaborative solutions across Hampden, Hampshire, Franklin and Berkshire Counties to prevent and end homelessness through a Housing First approach. It includes hundreds of partners from virtually every community sector – housing, child care, health care, education, workforce development – who are committed to making homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring.

The Network has identified the Right to Counsel Pilot Program as a top priority in its efforts to stem the avalanche of evictions expected when the eviction moratorium ends.

S. 2785, emergency legislation filed by Senator DiDomenico, will create a statewide Right to Counsel pilot project to protect renters and owner-occupants in areas of the state hardest hit by COVID-19. We know Western Massachusetts, in particular Hampden County’s larger cities of Springfield and Holyoke, are areas in our region bearing the brunt of COVID-19. These communities also have a disproportionate number of Black and Latinx residents who experience homelessness, a disproportionality that extends across the entire Western Massachusetts region (and the Commonwealth).

Massachusetts housing law is complicated and presumes representation on both sides. That is far from the reality: in 2018, over 92 per cent of tenants who faced eviction went to court without a lawyer, while 70 percent of landlords were represented by counsel. The consequences are dire for low-income tenants: eviction and homelessness.

Right now, our front-line housing organizations are inundated with calls from tenants unable to pay their rent due to COVID-19 reasons. Landlord organizations are already estimating 15,000 new evictions will be filed when the moratorium is lifted. As a public health matter and in the name of racial justice, we can’t let this happen.

The Network is a proud member of the Massachusetts Right to Counsel Coalition, which represents more than 130 organizations that include community groups, tenant organizations, housing and legal aid advocates, large property owners, municipalities, women's organizations, and many more. We have joined together in support of S.2785, The Right to Counsel Pilot Program, because it is absolutely critical to maintain justice and equity in the face of COVID-19's devastating consequences.

Thank you so much for your consideration.

Best,



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