



October 12, 2021

Honorable John Keenan
Senate Chair
Joint Committee on Housing

Honorable James Arciero
House Chair
Joint Committee on Housing

Re: Testimony in Support of Right to Counsel, TOPA, MRVP, HomeBASE, RAFT, Supportive Housing

Dear Chair Keenan and Chair Arciero and Members of the Joint Housing Committee:

I am writing on behalf of the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness (“Network”) to urge the Housing Committee to report favorably on the following bills that are among the Network’s highest priorities to prevent and end homelessness in the western region:

- [The Right to Counsel in Evictions](#) (H.1436/S.874)
- [Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act](#) (TOPA)(H.1426/S.890)
- [Codifying the Mass Rental Voucher Program](#) (MRVP) (H.1428/S.898)
- [Codifying the HomeBASE Program](#) (H.1372)
- [Codifying the RAFT Program](#) (H.1385)
- [Flexible funds to expand supportive housing](#) and services for adults, youth, and families experiencing homelessness (H.3838)

Each of these bills would address the urgent need to maintain housing stability, sustain affordable housing and increase access to supportive housing. Together, they will also make a significant impact in reducing the racial inequity that underlies homelessness across the Commonwealth.

The [Western MA 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 that centers racial equity. 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.

Right to Counsel, An Act promoting housing stability and homelessness prevention in MA

H.1436, Rep. Rogers and Rep. Day; S.874, Sen. DiDomenico

This bill would provide access to legal representation for low income and vulnerable tenants and owner occupants of 1-3 family homes, which is their sole dwelling, in eviction cases.

Right now, over 90% of tenants face evictions without a lawyer while over 80% of landlords have representation. We know legal representation for low-income tenants and owner occupants will create more housing stability for all, and in so doing will address the disproportionate impact of evictions on people of color, especially women. Initial ARPA funding could provide the means to get this program off the ground, joining several other states and reflecting the federal government’s priority to adopt right to counsel as a component of eviction diversion. [Factsheet here.](#)

Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA)

H.1426, Rep. Livingston and Rep. Consalvo/S.890, Sen. Jehlen

The TOPA Enabling Act would allow cities and towns the local option of providing tenants in multi-family buildings the right to match a third-party offer when their homes are being sold. Tenants can designate their rights to a non-profit or local housing authority, or partner with an affordable housing purchaser.

TOPA is critical now to address COVID-related housing speculation; to help tenants stay in their homes during this public health crisis; and to blunt the deep inequities that occur through displacement and unaffordable rents. [Factsheet here.](#)

Codifying Mass. Rental Voucher Program, H.1428, Rep. Madaro/S.898, Senator Lovely

This legislation will preserve long-term stability and protections for renters with vouchers. In addition to protecting MRVP from programmatic changes and uncertainty every budget cycle, this bill will deepen affordability for renters and improve the program for the up to 11,000+ households with low- and moderate-incomes it serves. [Factsheet here.](#)

Codifying and Strengthening HomeBASE, H.1372, Rep. Barber

This bill would put the HomeBASE program into state statute and direct DHCD to provide renewals of HomeBASE rental assistance in 12-month increments to families and children who otherwise would be facing a return to homelessness, continue to meet basic eligibility guidelines, and are in good standing in the program. More families would be able to remain stably housed, and the HomeBASE would be strengthened. [Factsheet here.](#)

Codifying and Strengthening the RAFT Program, H.1385, Rep. Decker and Rep. Miranda

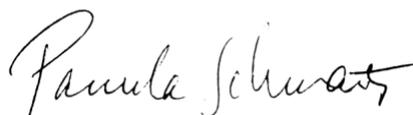
This bill would put the RAFT homelessness prevention program into state statute, and ensure that benefits will continue to be available to households early in a housing or utility crisis, beyond the duration of the pandemic. The bill also seeks to streamline access to RAFT, improve cross-agency collaboration, and allow households to access the resources needed to clear arrearages without arbitrary caps on assistance levels. [Factsheet here.](#)

Flexible Funds to Expand Supportive Housing, H.3838, Rep. Meschino

This bill would address the ongoing crisis facing unsheltered individuals experiencing mental health, substance use and other complex barriers to stable housing. It would provide a comprehensive approach to expanding investment in permanent supportive housing, combining affordable housing with intensive, coordinated support services, focusing on reaching high utilizers of crisis systems, including residents with behavioral health needs, justice-involved individuals, victims of domestic violence, and older adults. [Factsheet here.](#)

The Network urges a favorable report of these above bills to further our shared goals to prevent and end homelessness across Western Massachusetts and the Commonwealth.

Best,



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