



October 26, 2021

Honorable John Keenan
Senate Chair
Joint Committee on Housing

Honorable James Arciero
House Chair
Joint Committee on Housing

Re: Testimony in Support of Transfer Fee for Affordable Housing and Transforming the Individual Emergency Shelter System

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 **Transfer Fee for Affordable Housing** (S.868/H.1377) and the **Transformation of the Emergency Shelter System to Create Housing Strategies for Unaccompanied Homeless Adults** (H.3959).

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 across the western region who are committed to making homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring.

Transfer Fee for Affordable Housing, *An Act empowering cities and towns to impose a fee on certain real estate transactions to support affordable housing* (S.868, Senator Jo Comerford/H.1377, Representative Mike Connolly)

Western Massachusetts is no exception to the affordable housing crisis facing the Commonwealth. The lack of affordable housing in the western region is pervasive and extreme. At every single Network convening, whether it is to serve families, individuals, young adults or veterans, housing search workers share the same frustration over and over again: there are no affordable units. It is especially painful when the family or individual has a housing subsidy in hand, and after months of intensive housing search, must return it because they were unable to find an affordable unit in the allotted time. Sadly, this is not a unique occurrence.

The Transfer Fee for Affordable Housing would provide a critical tool in the solution to this crisis. This bill would empower local communities to tailor this tool to their specific needs. For Western Massachusetts, where home prices are lower than eastern Massachusetts, this bill allows for utilizing the county median sale price if a locality’s median is lower than the statewide median. It also allows for pooling of revenue within a region to account for the needs of smaller towns in our westernmost counties that would otherwise not have the capacity to administer this resource. And it allows for each community to choose their own fee rate, between .5% and 2%, to ensure a best match for each locality’s needs. This bill offers a local option with local control on multiple levels, making it perfectly suited for our Western Massachusetts communities.

For example, the City of Northampton has already begun the process to seek local approval of a Home Rule Petition for a transfer fee to meet the pressing need for more affordable housing in its community. This enabling legislation would make the process far more efficient for Northampton and would support all other Western Massachusetts cities and towns that may recognize the need for this resource but are dissuaded by the long and complicated road to a successful Home Rule Petition. This bill's passage would give local communities the state-level message they need and deserve: the transfer fee for affordable housing is an excellent tool to address your affordable housing shortage and it's available to you if you want it.

The Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness urges a favorable reporting of this bill with hopes that it will move forward as expeditiously as possible. We can and must change the weekly regionwide report of "there are no affordable units" or more starkly put: "there is no place for people to live." The Transfer Fee for Affordable Housing is a critical step in that direction.

Transforming our Individual Shelter System: *An Act to transform the Commonwealth's emergency response system and create housing strategies to end the homelessness of unaccompanied adults* (H.3959, Representative Natalie Higgins).

Through the course of this pandemic, we have seen in Western Massachusetts, and across the Commonwealth, the impact of the state's emergency response to the crisis of individual homelessness. Faced with an extraordinary public health crisis and the urgent need to shelter every person, the state enlisted the use of non-congregate shelter sites – primarily hotels – to keep people safe.

In the course of this experience, both here and across the state and country, we learned lessons that can and should inform our practices going forward. This bill H.3959 – the transformation of the emergency shelter response system – is the embodiment of lessons learned.

Specifically, it would end individual congregate shelter and ensure that all individual shelter is provided through non-congregate sites. The data in Western Massachusetts alone makes the case so compelling:

- In Hampden County, the 2020 "Point in Time" count showed there were 104 unsheltered people living on the street or in places not fit for human habitation. In 2021, **that count dropped to 29 individuals**. People unable to enter congregate shelter due to complex barriers were able to enter a non-congregate site. They stayed safer, and so did our communities.
- **Individuals in non-congregate sites also got re-housed much more quickly.** Over a 15-month period, from July 1, 2020 to September 30, 2021, 52% of people residing in non-congregate sites were re-housed as compared to a rate of 16% in congregate sites. Non-congregate shelter makes re-housing more possible more quickly. It offers a more stable home base, more dignity with four walls and a bathroom, and a calmer environment to engage with case managers to line up the paperwork and other essential logistics on the path to new housing.

Our Network partners have affirmed time and again over these many months that non-congregate shelter better serves the people struggling the most; that it keeps people off the street and in a safe environment, while putting them in a position to better engage with the necessary services to get re-housed quickly.

This pandemic has caused such a heartbreaking loss of life across our Commonwealth, among so many other continuing hardships. As always, our most vulnerable residents suffer the most. We owe it to them and each other to learn from the pain and make better choices going forward. Moving from a congregate to a non-congregate shelter system is an extremely measurable way of saying "we learned." Please report H.3959 out favorably. We can make this transformation happen.

Thanks very much for your consideration.

Best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Pamela Schwartz". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the word "Best,".

Pamela Schwartz, Director
Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness
pschwartz@westernmasshousingfirst.org
413-219-5658
<http://westernmasshousingfirst.org>