



COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
THE GENERAL COURT
STATE HOUSE, BOSTON 02133-1053

January 18, 2022

Honorable Senate President Karen E. Spilka
State House, Room 332
24 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02133

Re: Taking immediate action to allocate additional funding for emergency rental assistance instead of curtailing benefits

Dear Madam President,

We write to request urgent action to stop the ramp-down of the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) and allocate additional funds to the program. Our constituents across all four western counties, including over 150 partners from the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness, have made clear the timely need to fully sustain the ERAP program in order to prevent further housing instability and homelessness in our region during this new peak in the pandemic.

We thank Senate and House leadership and the Chair of the Joint Committee on Housing for their proactive and thoughtful approach to housing stabilization to date. Please know that the following members of the western Massachusetts delegation are with you as we push forward to meet the growing challenges of this pressing time.

ERAP has provided critical emergency rent and utility funds to Massachusetts families and individuals enduring the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is administered by the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) through the network of regional administering agencies. The Baker Administration has begun notifying stakeholders that ERAP is projected to run out of funds in just over six months, and that in response, DHCD has begun to wind down key portions of ERAP.

We are concerned that the state has decided to begin winding down ERAP instead of allocating additional federal funds to continue this critical emergency assistance, in the midst of a record-breaking COVID-19 infection spike that continues to disproportionately impact the most vulnerable communities. Breakthrough cases are doubling every week, and there are more COVID-19 positive cases now than there were last year at the previous height of the pandemic. Hospital intensive care units are over capacity and hospitals are overburdened across the state.

Western Massachusetts is no exception. In the two weeks prior to January 1, our four western counties confirmed 17,227 positive covid cases, an increase across each county that ranged from 2 to 5 times as high as the previous 2 weeks. Our region's hospitals are reporting their highest level of covid cases to date and lack of capacity in their emergency and non-emergency units.

At the same time, evictions continue. Over 3,700 evictions for non-payment of rent have been filed in Western Massachusetts alone (and over 18,000 statewide) since the eviction moratorium ended in October 2020. We know that many families, in fear of eviction, are leaving upon receipt of a notice to quit, before legally required to do so, causing displacement and untold trauma. We also know that access to rental assistance offers a critical lifeline to housing stability when no other recourse exists.

Yet, as rental assistance applications are increasing and COVID-19 infections are breaking records, DHCD has implemented changes that will place additional burdens on families and individuals already in crisis and end this critical lifeline. These changes were put in place without input from community stakeholders and with almost no notice to households counting on assistance to remain in their homes.

Three of the most concerning changes represent a fundamental shift in ERAP eligibility: (1) the recertification process has been eliminated as of January 1, 2022; (2) most tenants are unable to apply for future rent assistance from ERAP or the parallel state-funded homelessness prevention program, Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT), unless they have already fallen behind on rent; and (3) tenants are not able to use RAFT after exhausting ERAP benefits. DHCD has also implemented a decreased cap on RAFT benefits, as required by the Legislature's FY22 budget language. Households now can access a maximum benefit of only \$7,000, instead of the \$10,000 cap that was in place until December 31.

Taken together, these changes will likely lead to an increase in eviction filings and displacement as more applications "slip through the cracks." We must take action now to ensure an equitable housing recovery. We urge our chamber to take emergency action to access resources from the \$2.25 billion remaining from the state's allocation of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) fiscal recovery funds to replenish ERAP and eliminate barriers to access.

We look forward to working with you for a strong and equitable housing recovery for the region and across the state.

Warmest wishes and thank you for your leadership,



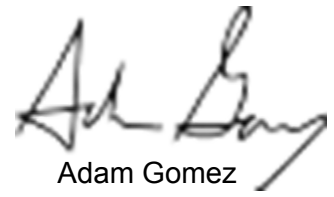
Jo Comerford
State Senator

Hampshire Franklin Worcester district



Anne Gobi
State Senator

*Worcester Hampden
Hampshire and Middlesex district*



Adam Gomez
State Senator

Hampden district



Adam Hinds
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*Berkshire Hampshire
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John Velis
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*Second Hampden and
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Cc:

Senate Ways and Means Committee Chair Michael Rodrigues

Senate Housing Committee Chair John Keenan