



Housing First  
for Hampden, Hampshire,  
Franklin and Berkshire Counties

June 15, 2023

Representative Jay Livingston and Senator Robyn Kennedy  
Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities  
24 Beacon Street  
Boston, MA 02133

**Re: Testimony in support of the Bill of Rights for People Experiencing Homelessness (H.211/S.112) and Improving Emergency Housing Assistance for Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness (H.145, S.86)**

Dear Chairs Straus and Crighton:

I am pleased to submit this written testimony on behalf of the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness in support of two bills before this Committee: (1) *An Act to create a bill of rights for people experiencing homelessness* (H.211/S.112, Representative Smitty Pignatelli, Representative Frank Moran and Senator Becca Rausch) and (2) *An Act improving emergency housing assistance for children and families experiencing homelessness* (H.145, S.86, Representative Marjorie Decker and Senator Adam Gomez).

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 that centers racial equity. It includes hundreds of partners from every community sector who are committed to making safe, decent and affordable housing a reality for all in western Massachusetts.

Homelessness in western Massachusetts is higher than it has been at any point in the last 5 years based on the most recent annual Point in Time Count conducted in January, 2023.

Additional data points include:

- 3,305 people were counted as experiencing homelessness
- 2,288 were persons in families (parents and children)
- 199 were sleeping unsheltered, a 150 percent increase since 2021
- 96 young adults ages 18-25 years old were counted as sleeping in shelter or on the streets, a 25 percent increase from 2022

The Point in Time Count also revealed in western Massachusetts the same racial inequity in homelessness that pervades the entire Commonwealth and nation. Here in the four western counties, Blacks make up 23 percent of the population experiencing homelessness while only 5

percent of the general population (4.6x over-representation); Latinos make up 49 percent of the homeless population while only 17 percent of the general population (2.9x over-representation).

This crisis of increasing homelessness and its grossly disproportionate impact on people of color requires a comprehensive approach, and these two bills before you are critical components.

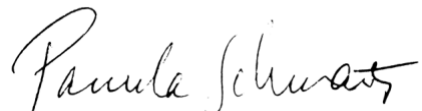
**The Act to Create a Bill of Rights for People Experiencing Homelessness** (H.211/S.1112) protects our most vulnerable residents against discrimination because they are without a place to live, ensuring they have the right to rest, seek shelter from the elements, occupy a legally parked car, pray, eat, and avoid needless harassment in public spaces. This bill creates a baseline of human dignity that every individual deserves, providing a critical starting point for the Commonwealth's response to the trauma of homelessness.

Similarly, the **Act to improve the Emergency Assistance Program** (H.145, S.86) ensures families with children are treated with the dignity they deserve as they navigate the Emergency Assistance (EA) shelter system. This bill would enshrine in statute protections the Legislature has repeatedly passed through the budget process regarding access to shelter and reporting requirements. It would create an ombudsperson office to provide families with systemic support when faced with barriers to shelter and related HomeBASE program benefits. This bill is necessary to realize the Legislature's own mandate that every child in the Commonwealth shall be sheltered.

For these reasons, we urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on these bills as soon as possible.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Pamela Schwartz".

Pamela Schwartz, Director  
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