



Housing First  
for Hampden, Hampshire,  
Franklin and Berkshire Counties

June 26, 2023

Senator Lydia Edwards and Representative James Arciero  
Joint Committee on Housing  
24 Beacon Street  
Boston, MA 02133

**Re: Testimony in Support of Upstream RAFT (H.1312/S.856); HomeBASE improvements (H.1297/S.890) and the MA Flexible Supportive Housing Subsidy Pool Program (H.1354/S.855)**

Dear Senator Edwards and Representative Arciero:

I am pleased to submit this written testimony on behalf of the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness in support of key legislative priorities outlined below.

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 sector who are committed to ensure safe, decent and affordable housing for all in western Massachusetts.

Towards that end, the Network urges the Joint Housing Committee to act as quickly as possible to advance the following bills:

**An Act Providing Upstream Homelessness Prevention Assistance to Families, Youth, and Adults (H.1312/S.856),**  
*Lead Sponsors: Representative Marjorie Decker and Senator Brendan Crighton*

Every day in the four counties of western Massachusetts, roughly 125 households seek rental or utility assistance to stave off eviction or utility shut-offs. The program Residential Assistance to Families in Transition (RAFT) offers this critical resource. And this bill would make RAFT more effective at accomplishing its intended goals.

Most importantly, this bill (H.1312/S.856) would allow tenants to access rental assistance before the Notice to Quit is served, an option that existed from 2020-2022 and that made a demonstrated difference in maintaining housing stability. Receiving a Notice to Quit is a traumatic event unto itself, leading to premature exits from housing for fear of eviction and ultimately increasing the chances of homelessness.

With close to 2,000 eviction filings in western Massachusetts alone in the first quarter of 2023 - a 25 percent increase compared to 2020 – strengthening RAFT is critical to stemming the tide of evictions. Moving the program further upstream, putting the program in state statute, and allowing access to the

resources needed to clear arrearages without arbitrary caps are all critical components for increasing housing stability.

**An Act promoting housing stability for families by strengthening the HomeBASE program (H.1297/S.890),** *Lead Sponsors: Representative Christine Barber and Senator Liz Miranda*

The annual Homelessness Point in Time Count in January, 2023, showed 2,288 family members experiencing homelessness in the four western counties, a 400 person increase over the previous year. Western Massachusetts is no exception to the family homelessness crisis facing the entire Commonwealth.

This HomeBase bill (H.1297/S.89) offers a critical component in the multi-pronged response to this crisis. By increasing the maximum benefit level to \$30,000 (from \$20,000) over the first 24 months and allowing for \$15,000 in subsequent renewal periods, families would have a better chance at becoming and staying housed. Additionally, putting HomeBASE into state statute would afford overall stability for the program and its recipients.

In monthly convenings of Network family housing search staff, the challenge of identifying affordable places for families to leave is a resounding theme. There are so few vacant units and even fewer at an affordable monthly rent. Increasing the HomeBASE maximum payment and allowing for extensions are fitting and necessary responses to the challenge at hand.

**An Act to create and implement a Massachusetts Flexible Supportive Housing Subsidy Pool Program (H.1354/S.855),** *Lead Sponsors: Representative Meschino and Senator Brendan Crighton*

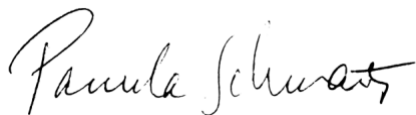
In western Massachusetts, individuals living in unsheltered homelessness experienced the most dramatic increase of all: over 150 percent since 2021, a total of 199 individuals living on the street or in places not fit for human habitation in 2023. Data driven evidence tells us that the most effective response for people experiencing chronic (and most likely unsheltered) homelessness with multiple disabilities is permanent supportive housing.

H.1354/S.855 would offer a critical vehicle for making that effective response possible through the creation of the Massachusetts Flexible Supportive Housing Pool Program (MHFHP). Funded by a statewide Funder's Collaborative to End Homelessness, this program would create one unified, flexible funding stream, including both private and public funds, to create an efficient and effective process for obtaining the support services and housing vouchers that make supportive housing possible.

H.1354 would take what we know works and make it work significantly better.

Thank you for issuing a favorable report on these 3 bills as expeditiously as possible.

Best,



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