



Housing First
for Hampden, Hampshire,
Franklin and Berkshire Counties

January 18, 2024

The Honorable James Arciero
Chair, Joint Committee on Housing
State House, Room 146
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Lydia Edwards
Chair, Joint Committee on Housing
State House, Room 413-C
Boston, MA 02133

Re: The Affordable Homes Act, H.4138

Dear Chairs Arciero and Edwards and members of the Joint Committee on Housing:

I am pleased to submit this testimony on behalf of the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness (“Network”), a network of over 300 partners across the western four counties working to prevent and end homelessness with a Housing First approach that centers racial equity.

We are thrilled by the opportunity the Affordable Homes Act (AHA) presents to address the extreme affordable housing gap in the western region. The Network enthusiastically supports the proposal’s robust investments in public housing and more affordable housing production. In partnership with the Western Massachusetts Housing Coalition, we urge your adoption of the [Coalition’s recommendations](#) to ensure these investments work for Western Massachusetts communities. We also want to thank our western Massachusetts legislators for their active support of the Coalition’s recommendations. We are grateful for their partnership.

The Network’s testimony will focus on amendments to a few key policy proposals that will help meet both the housing and homelessness crisis at once:

Transfer Fee for Affordable Housing: Our western Massachusetts partners initially greeted the inclusion of transfer fee in sections 19-20 of this bill with great enthusiasm. Unfortunately, disappointment followed soon after upon discovering that as currently proposed, this local option would be available only for home sales over \$1 million, effectively denying the western region – and other regions as well - the use of this tool altogether. In partnership with the Local Option for Housing Affordability Coalition (LOHA), the **Network urges your adoption of a mechanism to ensure the transfer fee is available to all communities across the Commonwealth**, in addition to a number of other vital amendments as described in greater detail by LOHA.

Eviction Record Sealing: The inclusion of eviction record sealing in Section 47 of this bill is critical to address the devastating barrier an eviction record poses in the search for a home. As a member of the HOMES Advisory Committee, the **Network urges the adoption of its recommended amendments included in Massachusetts Law Reform Institute testimony.** The Network especially supports an amendment that would allow for automatic sealing by the court in the event of dismissals, cases that tenants win and no-fault evictions. This change among others is critical to providing tenants the access they deserve to the housing they desperately need.

Supportive Housing Pool Fund: We applaud this bill's inclusion of supportive housing resources. As a member of the Supportive Housing Coalition, **the Network seeks the adoption of the full language from H.1354/S.855 into Section 45 of the bill.** This addition would streamline the administrative process of providing support services and housing vouchers and ensure that state programs are equitably distributed to reach residents that are most vulnerable. With a dramatic rise in chronically homeless individuals in our region in the last year alone, the supportive housing pool fund provides a critical pathway to making this type of housing more possible more quickly.

Access to Counsel: The Network joins with over 240 organizations to call for the Housing Committee to **include Access to Counsel in the Affordable Homes Act.** Western Massachusetts is seeing unprecedented eviction rates while shelters are at capacity and the number of people living unsheltered has reached an all-time high. Bringing Access to Counsel into the Affordable Homes Act will create a vital and timely tool to prevent more homelessness.

Finally, the Network asks that the Affordable Housing Act be amended to include two bills before the Housing Committee: **Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (H.1350/S.880)** and the **Local Option to Stabilize Rents and Protect Tenants (H.942/S.653).** The former offers a critical vehicle for preserving already affordable housing; the latter provides tenants vital protection against displacement right now. We cannot afford to wait.

In sum, we ask for your favorable report of this bill with the requested modifications as soon as possible. And we thank you very much for your consideration.

Best,



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