



Housing First  
for Hampden, Hampshire,  
Franklin and Berkshire Counties

July 22, 2025

The Honorable Becca Rausch and The Honorable Jack Patrick Lewis  
Joint Committee on Municipalities and Regional Government  
State House, Room 215  
Boston, MA 02133

**Re: Testimony in Support of H.2261 – An Act ending the criminalization of homelessness**

Dear Chair Rausch, Chair Lewis and Members of the Joint Committee on Municipalities and Regional Government:

I am writing on behalf of the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness (“Network”) in support of **H.2261 – An Act ending the criminalization of homelessness** - that would prohibit cities and towns from penalizing individuals who are experiencing homelessness from trespassing, sleeping or camping on public property.

The Network includes roughly 200 partners committed to coordinating efforts to prevent and end homelessness across Hampden, Hampshire, Franklin and Berkshire Counties with a Housing First approach that centers racial equity.

Across the western region, including Hampden, Hampshire, Franklin and Berkshire Counties, unsheltered homelessness continues to rise dramatically, increasing by 23% compared to last year, according to the most recent homelessness Point in Time Count. The count identified 318 individuals who were sleeping in places not fit for human habitation, a number that is 4 times higher than it was in 2021. Overall individual homelessness increased by 20% compared to last year, with more than 1,200 persons counted.

At the same time, rents have risen 32.5% since 2021 in Hampden, Hampshire and Franklin Counties, and 39.7% in Berkshire County. Eviction filings have risen 66% between 2022 and 2024.

Western Massachusetts shelters are almost always full with wait lists.

Our most vulnerable residents increasingly have no place to go.

The hopeful news amid this tragic situation is that we know what solutions work: supportive housing, mental health care, substance use treatment and other wrap-around support services.

**We also know what doesn’t work: criminalizing the people who are enduring this nightmare.** It is not only an inhumane response; it is also ineffective and costly. Criminalization only creates more barriers to secure housing, whether it be through lost documents, missed work or a criminal record that makes future rentals more difficult. It also wastes community resources to spend time and money to arrest or ticket people when working towards permanent housing is the solution.

We are seeing a rise in anticamping ordinances in other parts of the state that criminalize community members for sleeping outside. We need our legislative leaders to make clear that this is not the answer to a complex problem; that we can and must do better for our most vulnerable residents, and for our communities as a whole.

Please issue a favorable report on this bill at the soonest possible date. We deeply appreciate your consideration and your fast action.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pamela Schwartz". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Pamela Schwartz, Director  
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