

Mona Shadi's Remarks
10th Annual Gathering of the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness
May 29, 2026

Good morning neighbors. My name is Mona Shadi, I'm a member and co-founder of the Easthampton Tenants' Union.

I'd first like to thank the Network for their invitation to speak today, and send gratitude to all of the local legislators and community partners here.

My story in Western Massachusetts began when my family immigrated to Pittsfield from Egypt when I was four years old. In my new home I was told repeatedly by my teachers and elders: as long as I earned good grades in school, was polite and well-behaved, observed the laws, and worked hard I would do well for myself.

And indeed that was the course I plotted. I threw myself into my schoolwork, even when, at the age of fourteen, I had to enter the workforce to be a breadwinner for my family. Even when it took me eight years to earn my Associates degree at my community college. As I had to work two to three jobs to finance my education. Where I kept a pillow, blanket, and timer in my car so I could nap between shifts or before and after classes in the college parking lot. It was exhausting and demoralizing. But I took comfort in the belief that this was all to earn a gainful career, a home that I owned, and have the financial security to work one job and have it provide for my needs.

That never happened. I am still working multiple jobs and taking naps in my car in parking lots. After Community College, I won a scholarship to complete my Bachelor's at Mount Holyoke College, where I graduated with honors. But I couldn't find a well-paying position. I couldn't save money for a house. I couldn't afford to work just one full-time job. I did everything I was told one is supposed to do to be successful, and instead of being rewarded for that steadfastness, grit, and toil—I was almost thrown out of my home.

Last August I came home covered in dirt and mulch, after having spent the last ten hours working as a landscape laborer, to a packet in my mailbox informing me that my rent would be going up 30% or \$300 a month, and that I could accept the new rate or leave. I trembled holding that letter. I hadn't had a day off in weeks, working close to 70 hours a week, and all the money I earned was already earmarked for bills and rent. And now I was holding a piece of paper that said I was to be thrown out if I couldn't be squeezed for more.

Because of my background as an organizer, I pushed through that terror, and began knocking on my neighbors' doors to ask if they had gotten rent raises. I learned about our rights as renters and organized forty tenants to request a negotiation of our raises. Our landlord refused. When October came and I was faced with accepting the new rent, I sent in my original amount conveying to my landlord that I would continue to pay my old rent until he came to the negotiating table. In November I received notice that he had opened eviction proceedings against me.

For months, I worked two jobs, organized my neighbors and helped build the Easthampton Tenants Union. And in February, because of community, access to counsel, and organization, I won my case and the right to stay in my home with a reasonable rent raise.

Fighting an eviction is a terrifying experience I wouldn't wish on anyone. I won my case, but I'm also white, cis, able-bodied, young, and speak fluent American English. I had access to counsel, which only 7% of tenants facing evictions in Massachusetts receive. I have stood in doorways listening to neighbors who are veterans, disabled, single parents, and migrants tearfully share their hardships and despair. We

have lost wonderful neighbors and community because when confronted with inhumane rent raises they packed their lives up, pulled their children from the schools, and fled.

This is a crisis, it is chaos, and it is cruelty. And it is legal. There are no checks on landlords' ability to raise rents. When you ask them why the increase you will usually get a shrug and a retort of, "just meeting the market". But that market is cause for thousands of people like me possibly losing their homes. This is an emergency. And this is why we need rent control.

We, the people who are in danger of losing our housing, are asking you, our legislators: please help us stay safe and secure with a roof over our heads. We chose you to represent us and what is most important to our communities. Thank you to those who are already out front on this - special thanks to my own State Representative Homar Gomez for his commitment from day one. We ask all of you to join us now, to fight alongside us, to use your power as leaders to make the change we all need by passing the rent control bill that is before you. Let's make this happen together.

Thank you.