



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS  
*MAYOR'S OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT*  
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MAYOR

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*OFFICE OF HOUSING STABILITY*  
*ELLEN SHACHTER, DIRECTOR*

April 7, 2025

Senator Pavel Payano  
Representative Kip Diggs  
Joint Committee on Ways and Means

RE: Budget recommendations FY26 – ***shelter, housing subsidies and homelessness prevention***

Dear Senator Payano, Representative Diggs and Members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means:

My name is Ellen Shachter and I am the Director of the City of Somerville's Office of Housing Stability (OHS). I have been Director of OHS for six years and previously worked as a housing attorney for Cambridge and Somerville Legal Services for over two decades. Our office receives approximately 1500 request for housing stability services each year – on average over five new requests every day – most of these from Somerville's most vulnerable residents: older adults, people with disabilities and low-income families with minor children. Almost daily we see families at the brink of homelessness terrified of what may come next if they lose their housing. We need to be able to keep these tenants in their homes whenever possible, and to ensure there are adequate shelter resources to serve those families that ultimately do become homeless.

The answer to the question of what is needed to stabilize Massachusetts families is already well-known: sufficient funding for the EA shelter program so children are never left on Massachusetts streets and/or in highly dangerous living situations; increased state and federal funding for affordable housing; ample funding of critical prevention tools such as RAFT and the Older Adult Bridge Program now in a pilot phase; increased deep housing subsidies like HomeBase and MRVP, increased tenant protections to keep tenants in their homes whenever possible, and funding tools for municipalities to bridge gaps between available state and federal funding and the actual costs of affordable housing production. I know that you face difficult choices in FY26 as you craft your budget. I urge you to use all resources at your disposal including rainy day funds to enact a humane budget with sufficient resources for shelter and housing to keep Massachusetts residents safe and stably housed. Below are some of the line-items, funding levels and policy changes that I believe are most critical to achieving this goal:

**Older Adult Bridge Subsidy Program**

**Line Item 7004-0107 – should be expanded from a small pilot program to a statewide homelessness prevention initiative funded at \$10,000,000**



The Older Adult Bridge Program is a program to assist low-income older adults (60+) to pay their rent and remain in their homes while they are waiting to access permanent housing resources such as elderly/disabled public housing. In FY25 a pilot of the Older Adult Bridge Program was funded through 7004-0107 which was implemented in the City of Somerville. This pilot has been incredibly successful with all tenants served remaining in their homes and/or transitioned into permanent affordable housing. With older adults the fastest growing sector of the homeless population and with this population we desperately need to expand this pilot program statewide.

### **Emergency Assistance Shelter**

**Line Item 7004-0101: EA shelter should be adequately funded to support children and families in need of shelter without imposing arbitrary time limits on assistance.**

As stated, my office is on the front line of trying to prevent homelessness and connecting those families that do become homeless with EA shelter and other shelter resources. There is absolutely nothing more heart-wrenching than working with a homeless family with minor children that cannot get into, or is required to leave, the EA shelter system before they have another place to be other than the streets. Loss of access to shelter destabilizes jobs, schooling, and childcare and worsens both physical and mental health outcomes for children and their parents. Last and importantly, it is far more expensive to care for homeless families through hospitalizations, foster care placements, and the like than to fund a family in shelter.

Critical language/policy changes made to the EA line item should include:

Removing the arbitrary shelter stay limit which will force families out of shelter when before they have access to safe housing; and

Removing the cap on the number of families that can enter shelter.

### **Access to Counsel**

**Line Item 0321-1800: Funding request: \$5,000,000. Clarity that Access to Counsel is a permanent rather than pilot program.**

The disparity of representation in eviction cases is shocking. ***In Calander Year 2024 4.3% of tenants facing eviction were represented statewide while 91.4% of landlords were represented statewide.*** To keep tenants in their homes and out of our overburdened shelter system, tenants need access to legal counsel in eviction cases. Tenant attorneys can often obtain win-win case resolutions in eviction cases connecting tenants to rental assistance and other services that enable tenants to remain stable in their homes. Given the insufficient stock of housing in general, and affordable housing in particular in Massachusetts, it is critical that we keep tenants in their homes whenever possible. In FY25 Access to Counsel was funded as a pilot program at \$2.5 million. This pilot program is making a big difference for those with access to attorneys and

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snow is the time to begin building a strong statewide Access to Counsel program. \$5,000,000 will enable us to begin the development of an Access to Counsel program statewide.

### **RAFT (Residential Assistance to Families in Transition)**

#### **RAFT Line Item 7004-9316: Funding request: \$300 million**

Rental assistance is the most important line of defense against homelessness - \$7000 per year used to be sufficient to enable many families to pay off arrears and remain in their homes. In places like Somerville where median rents are \$3,300/month this simply is insufficient to prevent evictions caused by temporary loss of income due to job loss, family illness or unanticipated medical expenses. ***RAFT benefits need to be increased to \$10,000/household/year to reflect huge increases in rent.*** In Somerville, average rents increased ***25% over the last two years.*** Given dramatically increased rents \$7000 is often insufficient to preserve tenancies.

### **Home Base**

#### **Home Base Line Item 7004-1008: Funding request: \$80,000,000**

HomeBase is one of the most effective transitional programs in Massachusetts keeping families out of shelter and dangerous living situations and decreasing the length of EA shelter stays that are so costly to the state. To maximize the ability of advocates in offices like mine to keep families off the streets and out of shelter Homebase ***benefits should increase the maximum benefit levels from \$25,000 to \$50,000 over the first 24 months of the program.*** Unfortunately, in order to be financially eligible for EA shelter/Homebase you need to be extremely low income (below 115% of poverty) with some families lacking any income altogether. With dramatically increased rents throughout much of the state, the \$25,000 maximum currently allowed for a 24-month period is often insufficient to achieve housing stability and to prevent a return to shelter. Without sufficient funding it can also be difficult to convince landlords to allow those with HomeBase to move into available units. We need to be able to show landlords that tenants have the income and financial support they need to pay their rent at least for the two-year period in question.

Thank you in advance for taking the time to read and consider these comments.

Sincerely,  
*Ellen Shachter (electronic signature)*

Ellen Shachter

