

R Feynman, Disability Policy Consortium

For Joint Committee on Housing

For bills heard September 27, 2023

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF **H.1351/S.888**, *AN ACT RELATIVE TO THE MASSACHUSETTS RENTAL VOUCHER PROGRAM*; **S. 864**, *AN ACT PROMOTING ACCESS TO COUNSEL AND HOUSING STABILITY IN MASSACHUSETTS*; AND **S.881/H.1307**, *AN ACT CREATING THE MASSACHUSETTS HEALTHY HOMES PROGRAM*

Dear Chairman Edwards, Chairman Arciero, and Distinguished Members of the Joint Committee on Housing,

My name is R Feynman, and I am the Senior Community Organizer at the Disability Policy Consortium. Thank you very much for the opportunity to address the Committee in support of bills H.1351/S.888, S. 684, and S.881/H.1307 on the DPC's behalf.

The Disability Policy Consortium is a statewide organization focused on research, advocacy, and support by and for the disabled community. Housing is a major focus of our advocacy team, because it's a major issue for people with disabilities. People with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be below the poverty line than their nondisabled counterparts, and we are significantly less likely to be employedⁱ. We are more likely to experience housing instability and homelessnessⁱⁱ. Affordable, accessible housing options are few and far between. At the same time, housing is tied to better health outcomes, stabler mental health, and improved quality of lifeⁱⁱⁱ. It is with these issues in mind that we support these bills.

H.1351/S.888, *AN ACT RELATIVE TO THE MASSACHUSETTS RENTAL VOUCHER PROGRAM*

Mobile voucher programs serve a significant need – housing support without the constraints of public housing buildings, creating more equitable and diverse apartment complexes, communities, and neighborhoods, as well as allowing low income individuals and families to move into higher opportunity areas and build better lives for themselves and their children.

The DPC has been working for almost a decade to increase budgetary support for MRVP's sister program, the Alternative Housing Voucher Program, which does exist in statute. Through the years, we have seen the benefits of existing in statute; we can rest assured that the program will continue to exist essentially as it does now, we don't have

to worry that it could be completely rewritten during the annual budget process, and the statute includes minimum standards for units. MRVP exists in a kind of limbo that 12,000 voucher holders should not be stranded in.

S. 864, AN ACT PROMOTING ACCESS TO COUNSEL AND HOUSING STABILITY IN MASSACHUSETTS;

With all the issues people with disabilities face obtaining housing, then even if it's not perfect, we really want to stay. But disabilities can put you at more risk for eviction. If you lose your job due to discrimination, for example, or have your SSI/SSDI benefits cut unexpectedly, and you fall behind on rent. If you experience a manic episode or mental health crisis, and your neighbors report you as disruptive. If your brain fog, executive dysfunction, or developmental disability make it difficult for you to keep organized and you lose track of important paperwork, or you just don't realize it's important.

I'd like to tell you about my friend. I met her at a trans community-building group – at which she was a foundational presence, and one of the most regular attendees. She has disabilities and receives SSI. She loves video games, sailor moon, and trains. She struggled for a very long time to get access to a housing voucher, find a place to live, and move out of her controlling mother's house. She has lived in her own apartment for about 5 years now. My friend has struggled to have enough money to live for the whole time I've known her. She is able to work part time, but many employers don't see past her disability. When she lost her most recent job, she fell behind on rent. Despite having a housing voucher, she has been served with a notice to quit and has an eviction hearing this Thursday.

As a person who does housing advocacy for people with disabilities, I've tried to help my friend throughout this process. I recommended that she reach out to a lawyer – after all, it is a court hearing. She struggled to find a pro bono lawyer in time for her court date. Housing law and regulations are confusing even before you bring in vouchers and public housing policy. She's not an expert at those things, and has struggled in the past to get people in positions of power to listen to her and understand what she's saying. If the HOMES were already in effect, and there was a program that granted her access to counsel, I would rest much easier. Knowing that someone who has had time to listen to her story and could communicate it in an effective way to the judge, was on the case.

She spoke with her building manager and thought it was resolved and didn't show up to the court date. She was ruled against by default and now has to pay a significant amount of money back to her building every month or she will be evicted. I know she could have reached a better outcome with access to a lawyer.

S.881/H.1307, AN ACT CREATING THE MASSACHUSETTS HEALTHY HOMES PROGRAM

The legislation will establish the Massachusetts Healthy Homes Program (MHHP) Fund, which will address a multitude of health hazards including, but not limited to,

lead, asbestos, mold and pests. It will also address conditions preventing installation of measures to improve energy or water efficiency and utilize renewable energy. It will also leverage funding from, and increase coordination with, existing home repair programs.

Childhood lead poisoning is a completely avoidable condition that causes lifelong disabilities. Asthma is, itself, a disability, and can be significantly exacerbated by mold and pests. These programs, which will make housing safer and healthier for families across the state and are focused specifically on improving outcomes for residents of color, will also improve the lives of people with disabilities and increase the number of places we have the option of living.

Please move all of these bills swiftly out of committee and onto their next steps.

Thank you,
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ⁱ <https://www.mass.gov/doc/massachusetts-and-us-disability-facts-statistics-2020/download>

ⁱⁱ https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Homelessness-in-America-Focus-on-chronic.pdf page 2:
“It is estimated that on any given day nearly one-quarter (24%) of individuals experiencing ... are people with disabilities.” About 10-15% of the US population has a disability, so disabled people are over-represented.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hpb20180313.396577/>