

October 14, 2021

Honorable Michael J. Rodrigues
Senate Chair
Joint Committee on Ways and Means

Honorable Aaron Michlewitz
House Chair
Joint Committee on Ways and Means

Honorable Daniel Hunt
House Chair
House Committee on Federal Stimulus and Census Oversight

Honorable John Keenan
Senate Chair
Joint Committee on Housing

Honorable James Arciero
House Chair
Joint Committee on Housing

In Support of Passage and Funding of an Act promoting housing stability and homelessness prevention in Massachusetts S. 874 (Sen. Sal DiDomenico), H. 1436 (Rep. David Rogers and Rep. Michael Day)

As members of the health care and public health community, we urge swift **passage of S. 874 and H. 1436 to create a statewide right to counsel program for eviction cases and fund it with American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds in the amount of \$78 million** over three years (\$26 million/year).

In June, noting the public health benefits of legal representation, **Connecticut passed a statewide right to counsel program for eviction cases and funded it with ARPA funding over the next two years** while a permanent source of funding is located.

Massachusetts needs to seize this critical opportunity to do the same.

Last year, members of the health care and public health community joined with municipal leaders and community advocates and urged Governor Baker to fund an emergency statewide access to counsel pilot program during the pandemic. The Governor answered the call and created a temporary program with COVID relief funding, the COVID Eviction Legal Help Project. Quickly scaling up during the fall of 2020, by the end of June 2021, the project helped over 7,700 people of which at least 2,600 were children. Massachusetts needs to hold onto the success of this project and not lose the investment that has been made.

Now more than ever with dominance of the Delta variant and the start of the school year, public health and housing stability are inextricably intertwined.

- Evictions increase child malnutrition and poor child health.
- Evictions increase maternal depression, and evictions during pregnancy are associated with low birth weight and premature birth, which can have lifelong health impacts.

- The threat of eviction causes high blood pressure, depression, anxiety, and psychological distress.
- People who have been evicted and are experiencing homelessness are more likely to contract infections, have higher rates of hospitalization for asthma, and have a higher prevalence of behavioral and mental health problems, including suicidal ideations.

Evictions further fuel racial health inequities. Due to the persistent discrimination in housing, Black and Latinx people are more likely to rent, more likely to struggle to pay rent, and more likely to be evicted. The inequity extends to access to legal representation where tenants are almost always unrepresented and face a complicated legal system alone. In Fiscal Year 2020, only 8.5% of tenants in Massachusetts had legal representation in eviction cases, whereas 81% of landlords had a lawyer.

By adopting a right to counsel as part of a comprehensive response to housing stability, Massachusetts can address these inequities and level the playing field.

We urge the Massachusetts Legislature to make an investment, as other states have done, and through ARPA funds launch a strong Right to Counsel that makes sense for our Commonwealth.

We thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Organizations

Allston Brighton Health Collaborative - Anna Leslie, Director

Beth Israel Lahey Health, Inc. - Kevin Tabb, President and CEO & Jamie Katz, General Counsel

Boston Children's Hospital - Shima Anwar, Physician

Brockton Neighborhood Health Center - Sue Joss, CEO

Cambridge Health Alliance- Assaad Sayah, MD, CEO

Children's HealthWatch - Richard Sheward, Director of Innovative Partnerships

City of Boston - Marty Martinez, Chief of Health and Human Services

Coalition for a Healthy Greater Worcester - Casey Burns, Director

Community Action Agency of Somerville, Inc. - David Gibbs, Executive Director

Edward M. Kennedy Community Health Center - Stephen J. Kerrigan, President and CEO

Fenway Health - Carl Sciortino, Executive Vice President

Health Resources in Action - Steven Ridini, President/CEO

Immigrant Service Providers Group/Health - Alex Pirie, Coordinator

Institute for Community Health - Sarah Jalbert, Executive Director

Lawrence CommunityWorks - Jessica Andors, Executive Director

LifeCycles Therapy - Melanie Cohn-Hopwood, LICSW

Lynn Community Health Center - Kiame Mahaniah, MD

Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations - Elana Brochin, Program Director for Health Equity

Massachusetts Association of Community Health Workers - Lisette Blondet, Executive Director

Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers - Kathryn Cohen, Director of Government Affairs and Public Policy

Massachusetts Public Health Association - Maddie Ribble, Director of Public Policy & Campaign Strategy

Medical Legal Partnership/Boston - Samantha Morton, CEO

Public Health Institute of Western MA - Jessica Collins, Executive Director

Trinity Health of New England - Daniel F. Keenan, JD, Regional Vice President Advocacy and Government Relations

Uniting Citizens for Housing Affordability in Newton - Josephine McNeil, Co-Chair & Emily Cagwin, Co-Chair

Individuals

Amanda Stewart, Attending Physician, Division of Emergency Medicine, Boston Children's Hospital

Brent Henry, Member, Mintz

Charles Homer, MD, MPH, Senior Advisor, Economic Mobility Pathways

Ellen Forman, Manager, Community Resource Center, Mass General Hospital, Social Service Department

Erin Dowd, LICSW, therapist in private practice

Jeffrey Edwards, Resident Physician, Boston Medical Center

Katherine Douglas, MD< Boston Children's Hospital and Boston Medical Center

Melissa Alao, LICSW, Boston Children's Hospital

Mordechai Kamel, MD

Norbert Goldfield, MD, Health Center

Ronnie Leavitt, Longmeadow MA

cc: The Honorable Karen E. Spilka
The Honorable Ronald J. Mariano