

September 2, 2020

The Honorable Charlie Baker
Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts
State House, Room 360
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Governor Baker,

Now more than ever housing stability and health are inextricably intertwined. As the Commonwealth seeks to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and keep people safe, we must continue to do everything within our power to prevent housing instability and evictions.

The eviction moratorium and its extension, advisories and orders to stay safe at home, emergency funding for rental assistance, and providing masks for people in shelters and public housing, have all been essential interventions. We are grateful for your leadership.

Every day, health care facilities across the Commonwealth experience the effects of housing instability. The impact of evictions and homelessness on people's health is well documented:

- People who are not chronically homeless but face housing instability in the form of moving frequently, falling behind on rent, or couch surfing are more likely to experience poor health in comparison to their stably housed peers.¹
- People who are threatened with eviction are more likely to report high blood pressure, depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. Too often eviction leads to overcrowding, moving into unsafe housing, and homelessness.²
- People experiencing homelessness have higher rates of hospitalization for asthma, are more likely to contract infections, and have a higher prevalence of behavioral and mental health problems, including attention-deficit disorder and suicidal ideation.³
- Increasing stress and disrupted access to usual health care before and during homelessness can lead to more pregnancy and childbirth complications and greater reliance on emergency rooms for prenatal and postpartum care.⁴

¹ [*Housing and Health: An Overview of the Literature*](#), DOI: 10.1377/hpb20180313.396577 **Health Affairs Health Policy Brief** (June 7, 2018).

² [*The Hidden Health Crisis of Eviction*](#), Allison Bovell-Ammon and Megan Sandel (October 5, 2018). *The Threat of Home Evictions and its Effects on Health Through the Equity Lens: A Systematic Review*, Vásquez-Vera, Hugo, et al., **Social Science & Medicine**, Vol. 175, pp. 199–208 (2017). *Eviction's Fallout: Housing, Hardship, and Health*, Desmond, Matthew, and Rachel Tolbert Kimbro, **Social Forces**, Vol. 94, No. 1, pp. 295–324 (September 2015).

³ [*Pediatric Emergency Department Visits for Homelessness After Shelter Eligibility Policy Change*](#), Amanda M. Stewart, et al., **Pediatrics**, Vol. 142, No. 5., p2 (November 2018).

- Children who experienced homelessness even if only while in utero are more likely to be hospitalized or suffer worse health, compared to their peers.⁵

While 78% of landlords have legal representation, only 7% of tenants statewide have legal representation. **Ninety-three percent (93%) - the overwhelming majority of tenants face evictions alone.** This creates an unfair mismatch, a disparity of legal representation for which the consequences can be devastating. Black and Latino households have been disproportionately hit by the pandemic's health, housing, and economic crisis, and will be disproportionately vulnerable to eviction and homelessness.⁶

For vulnerable tenants who face court evictions, having a lawyer to translate what is happening, to interpret complicated laws and procedures, to file legal pleadings that help them tell their side of the case, to stay on top of fast moving deadlines, and to defend them in court makes a difference. In New York City, 84% of the tenants who receive an attorney under their right to counsel law **stay housed.**⁷

As members of the health care and public health community, we join with municipal leaders and community advocates and urge you to support funding in the amount of \$6 million for an emergency statewide right to counsel pilot program for full legal representation for low-income tenants and homeowners in eviction proceedings as an essential housing stability intervention.

We must address the disparity of legal representation so that vulnerable people do not face the trauma of a court eviction alone.

We thank you for your leadership on this issue and hope that you will continue to work with community stakeholders to develop needed housing stability interventions over the next year to get us through this.

⁴ [*Health Care Utilization and Expenditures of Homeless Family Members Before and After Emergency Housing*](#), Robin E, Clark, et al., **American Journal of Public Health**, Vol 108, No. 6, pp 808–14 (2018).

⁵ [*Compounding Stress The Timing and Duration Effects of Homelessness on Children's Health*](#), Megan Sandel, MD MPH, Richard Sheward, MPP, and Lisa Sturtevant, PhD, **INSIGHTS Housing Policy Research**, The Center for Housing Policy and Children's HealthWatch (June 2015).

⁶ [*Evictions in Boston: The Disproportionate Effects of Forced Moves on Communities of Color*](#), Report by City Life Vida Urbana in partnership with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (June 2020).

⁷ [*NYC Right to Counsel: First year results and potential for expansion*](#), referencing eviction data published by the NYC Department of Investigation. Oksana Mironova, Community Service Society, (March 25th, 2019).

Organizations

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cc: The Honorable Karen E. Spilka
The Honorable Robert A. DeLeo
The Honorable Michael J. Rodrigues
The Honorable Aaron Michlewitz