



Housing First
for Hampden, Hampshire,
Franklin and Berkshire Counties

September 27, 2023

Representative James Arciero and Senator Lydia Edwards
Joint Committee on Housing
24 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02133

Re: Testimony in support of:

An Act Promoting Access to Counsel and Housing Stability in Massachusetts (S.864)
An Act Codifying the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (H.1351/S.888)
An Act Establishing the Healthy Homes Program (H.1307/S.881)
An Act to Establish an Office of Fair Housing and a Fair Housing Trust Fund (H.1377/S.866)

Dear Chairs Arciero and Edwards and members of the Joint Committee on Housing:

I am pleased to submit this testimony on behalf of the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness in support of the following bills:

- **An Act Promoting Access to Counsel and Housing Stability in Massachusetts (S.864)**, sponsored by Rep. Rogers and Rep. Day and Sen. DiDomenico
- **An Act Codifying the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (H.1351/S.888)**, sponsored by Rep. Madaro and Sen. Lovely
- **An Act Establishing the Healthy Homes Program (H.1307/S.881)**, sponsored by Rep. Cruz, Rep. Arriaga and Sen. Keenan
- **An Act to establish an office of Fair Housing and a Fair Housing Trust Fund (H.1377/S.866)**, sponsored by Rep. Tyler, Rep. Rogers and Sen. Edwards

The Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness (“Network”) supports collaborative solutions across Hampden, Hampshire, Franklin and Berkshire Counties to prevent and end homelessness through a Housing First approach that centers racial equity. It includes hundreds of partners from every community sector who are committed to making safe, decent and affordable housing a reality for all in western Massachusetts.

An Act Promoting Access to Counsel and Housing Stability in Massachusetts (S.864)
Sponsored by Rep. Rogers, Rep. Day, Sen. DiDomenico

This legislation will create an Access to Counsel Program that provides legal representation for tenants and owner-occupants with low incomes in eviction proceedings and help prevent homelessness, stop illegal or unnecessary evictions and reduce displacement.

Right now in Massachusetts, 9 out of 10 tenants are unrepresented while over 80% of landlords have legal representation. It is a system grossly out of balance, with profoundly lasting consequences for the tens of thousands of children and their parents who must suffer the experience of eviction.

In western Massachusetts, we have seen a 36% rise in eviction filings over the last year, totaling close to 4,000 filings in the last 8 months alone. Our 2023 homelessness point in time count in January, 2023 (prior to the migrant family crisis), showed the highest increase in homelessness since any point over the last 5 years, totaling an estimated 3,305 individuals in the four western counties.

An Access to Counsel program is urgently needed to address the fundamental inequity for tenants facing eviction, which will in turn help prevent evictions and the homelessness that flows from it. We know from other states and cities across the country, that an Access to Counsel program results in greater housing stability. At a time when Massachusetts is facing unprecedented homelessness, when every possible resource for housing stability must be harnessed, it is time for the Commonwealth to adopt the Access to Counsel program.

An Act Codifying the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (H.1351/S.888)

Sponsored by Rep. Madaro, Sen. Lovely

This legislation would codify the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP) in state statute, protecting the important improvements made to the program in the Fiscal Year 2024 budget and improving it even further.

The improvements include:

1. Deepening affordability for renters through larger voucher payment share;
2. Improving renter safety by requiring inspections;
3. Increasing the administrative fees so regional housing agencies and housing authorities can better cover the cost of the program; and
4. Improving data collection.

In western Massachusetts, a recent report by the UMass Donahue Institute showed an affordable housing gap of 11,000 units, slated to grow to 19,000 by 2025. The Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program plays a critical role in addressing this gap. Codifying this program through passage of this bill will ensure that role continues in the strongest way possible.

An Act creating the Massachusetts Healthy Homes Program (H.1307/S.881)

Sponsored by Rep. Cruz, Rep. Arriaga, Sen. Keenan

This legislation will create the Massachusetts Healthy Homes Program, providing grants and low-cost loans to income-eligible homeowners and property owners to make the necessary repairs. This is especially crucial to western Massachusetts given its older housing stock and the urgent need to rehabilitate housing in order to preserve it.

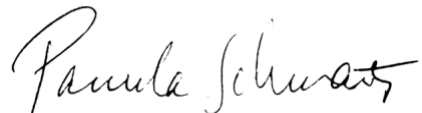
An Act to establish an office of Fair Housing and a Fair Housing Trust fund (H.1377/S.866)

Sponsored by Rep. Tyler, Rep. Rogers, Sen. Edwards

This Legislation establishes an Office of Fair Housing and Fair Housing Trust Fund on the State level to help combat housing discrimination at all levels, including development, sales, lending, appraisals, marketing, tenant selection, applications, and zoning. In western Massachusetts, similar to the entire Commonwealth, the racial inequity in homelessness is glaring. Point in Time count data of January, 2023, shows that Blacks experience homelessness at a rate 4.6 times higher than their proportion of the population, and latinos 2.9 times higher. This bill is a critical step to address the systemic racism that underlies homelessness.

The Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness urges this Committee to issue a favorable report on these four bills as soon as possible. We recognize that nothing less than comprehensive action is required to address the affordable housing and homelessness crisis at hand and we deeply appreciate your consideration and your service.

Best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Pamela Schwartz".

Pamela Schwartz, Director
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