



Testimony submitted to the Joint Committee on Housing
In Support of H. 695 An Act providing a homeless bill of rights
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The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts urges you to support enactment of H.695 An Act providing a homeless bill of rights. This bill would ensure that “no person's rights, privileges, or access to public services may be denied or abridged solely because he or she is experiencing homelessness. Such a person shall be granted the same rights and privileges as any other resident of the commonwealth.”

Many thousands of families and individuals have lost their homes due to the mismatch between the high cost of rents in Massachusetts and the ability to earn enough to cover rent and other necessities. We should not be making life more difficult for those who currently do not have a home and a permanent address. Many public programs legitimately require that applicants give an address to be eligible. However, it has become customary for people to temporarily adopt the address of a relative, friend, or social service agency. The temporary address allows someone experiencing homelessness to continue to receive mail (including any benefits they are entitled to) and to be contacted when they are looking for jobs, housing, education, medical appointments and acceptance to any programs that would help them move forward in life.

All our public agencies should accept a temporary address when needed by individuals. In addition, people should not be prevented from using public facilities such as parks and libraries simply because they appear to be homeless when the facilities are open to others. This kind of discrimination does not represent our best public values of equality of access and opportunity.

The League particularly notes that the right of citizens to vote should not be taken away because of homelessness. The United States has a long history of broadening the franchise beyond property owners and others of privilege to all citizens who wish to vote. Denying someone the right to register to vote because he or she is homeless would take us back to an era when the right to influence government was restricted to those who seemed to deserve it. Today we want to view voting as a reflection of equal rights for all. Massachusetts already has mechanisms for homeless persons to register and vote, which the League commends and expects to be vigorously defended. H. 695 would back the presumption that voting rights cannot be infringed due to a temporary condition of homelessness.

Please take the necessary steps to move H. 695 out of the Joint Committee on Housing and toward enactment during this legislative session. Thank you.