



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF MASSACHUSETTS

133 Portland Street, Boston, MA 02114 • Tel: 617-523-2999 • Fax: 617-248-0881
E Mail: lwwma@lwwma.org • Website: www.lwwma.org

Testimony submitted to the Joint Committee on Housing
In Support of H.659 An Act to protect families experiencing homelessness
from having to sleep in unsafe places
By Clarice B. Gordon – LWVMA Basic Human Needs Specialist
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The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts supports H.659 An Act to protect families experiencing homelessness from having to sleep in unsafe places. Providing a safe place for a family with children to spend the night when they have become homeless should be a primary responsibility of our government. Instead, the Department of Housing and Community Development has the policy of requiring people to first spend at least one night in a place not meant for human habitation before they can get emergency shelter services. Some of the words that ordinary people apply to such a policy are harsh, bizarre, cruel, inhumane, and unbelievable.

What a frightening time it is for children to find out that their family can no longer stay “at home” (the place they have known as home), that tonight they have to stay in a place that is nobody’s home, and that they should try to sleep where people shouldn’t be sleeping. This happened even though their mother has tried to do the right thing and ask for help when all the other possibilities did not work out. How scary is this world where grown-ups send you away to stay at a hospital emergency room, or maybe find a bench at the train station, or to brush your teeth at McDonald’s and sleep in your car? Could you go to school the next day and do your work? If your stomach hurts, will you feel better if you can curl up in a chair? How can we let the Commonwealth be responsible for children living through such an experience? Even for one night.

Denying shelter to families because they have slept safely the night before has affected several hundred families in the last year, and we must pay attention to them. This is about basic help for our most vulnerable residents. The commitment to abolish homelessness is a worthy goal, but part of that is to change this shameful policy of requiring proof that a family truly needs emergency shelter by taking its children to an unfit place for at least one night.

The League believes that every family should have a decent home and supports Massachusetts continuing its work to eliminate homelessness. We are aware that it is an expensive program and that there have been setbacks in recent years, but a problem like homelessness has many facets and we must be persistent. We urge the Joint Committee on Housing to stand up for the destitute families who need a safe place to sleep every night. We ask that you approve H.659 and use your influence with other legislators to get it passed in 2017.

Thank you for your consideration.