



**Testimony submitted to the Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities
In support of H.150/S.76 An Act relative to the safety, dignity, and civil rights of persons experiencing homelessness
By Clarice Gordon, LWVMA legislative specialist on meeting basic human needs
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The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts urges you to support H.150/S.76 An Act relative to the safety, dignity, and civil rights of persons experiencing homelessness. This bill provides definitions and a list of rights that ensure that persons experiencing homelessness are not discriminated against because they have lost their homes and have no current address. They should be granted the same rights and privileges as any other citizen of the Commonwealth. The bill makes modifications to several of the General Laws to change language that would clarify the intention to treat persons experiencing homelessness fairly and with dignity.

Many thousands of families and individuals with lower incomes have lost their homes due to the high cost of rents in Massachusetts. The Commonwealth should provide assistance to persons experiencing homelessness; the laws and the practices of public officials should not make life more difficult for them. Many public programs legitimately require that applicants give an address to be eligible. 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.

Too often, people have been prevented from using public facilities such as parks and libraries simply because they appear to be homeless when the facilities are open to others. There have also been incidents when people were told to move their cars when they lingered too long even though parking was not prohibited. 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.150/S.76 would back the presumption that voting rights cannot be infringed due to a temporary condition of homelessness.

Please take the necessary steps to move this bill out of the Joint Committee and toward enactment this legislative session. Thank you for your consideration.