



Testimony submitted to the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities

In Support of H.202/S.111 An Act improving emergency housing assistance for children and families experiencing homelessness

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The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts supports H.202/S.111, An Act improving emergency housing assistance for children and families experiencing homelessness. The bill improves access and administrative issues for families with children seeking Emergency Assistance shelter and HomeBASE rehousing benefits. It would allow families who are homeless or are at immediate risk of losing their homes to be placed in shelter immediately and not turned away because they do not have necessary documents in hand or have not spent at least one night in a place not suitable for sleeping (such as a car, abandoned building or waiting room). Other measures, such as access to Department of Transitional Assistance data and an ombudsperson unit in the Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development, would facilitate prompt access to housing resources. An annual report of the services provided would allow evaluation of how these new provisions are working.

We have had many years when thousands of families with children have been homeless in Massachusetts. In the last few years before the pandemic, the numbers were going down from highs in 2014 and the administration made a good effort to avoid using motels and hotels for emergency family housing. Moratoriums on evictions helped many families stay in housing during the Covid-19 emergency. Yet on September 30, 2020, there were 2,898 families with children and pregnant individuals in the Emergency Assistance shelter program, with 11 families with children in motels. During the 2018-19 academic year, public schools reported serving 24,777 students who were experiencing homelessness. During recent months, over 300 families have applied for assistance and over 40% have been turned away, so sheltered families do not include those who are doubled up and living in very crowded or unsuitable situations.

It is hard to estimate the need for housing as the pandemic continues and when evictions pick up again. Part of the problem is the overall shortage of housing in Massachusetts, particularly modestly-priced rentals where lower-income families can afford to live even when they get rental assistance. It is important to have an overall system in place for timely assistance to families that does not prolong their struggles and trauma. Particularly for children, both medical and educational costs have been shown to increase because of family homelessness.

For decades, the League of Women Voters has been advocating for every American family to have a decent home and a suitable living environment. We believe that state and local governments should establish effective agencies to aid, promote, coordinate, and supplement the housing programs of the federal government and the private sector. Governments at all levels should make available sufficient funds for housing assistance programs.



The Massachusetts League is made up of 47 local Leagues from the Berkshires to Cape Cod. We urge the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities to report this bill favorably out of committee and guide its passage during this 192nd session.