

Abby Kelley Foster House, Inc.

Advocacy Network to End Family Homelessness

Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program

Boston Tenant Coalition

Cambridge Cares About AIDS

Catholic Charities, Archdiocese of Boston

Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance

Children's Health Watch

Children's League of Massachusetts

City Life/Vida Urbana

Crittenton Women's Union

Emmaus, Inc.

Family Economic Initiative

Greater Boston Legal Services

Grow Clinic for Children

Homes for Families

Horizons for Homeless Children

House of Hope

Housing Families Inc.

Massachusetts Advocates for Children

Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy

Massachusetts Catholic Conference

Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless

Massachusetts Law Reform Institute

Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

Medical-Legal Partnership | Boston

National Association of Social Workers, Massachusetts Chapter

National Student Partnerships - Somerville

Neighborhood Legal Services, Inc.

Project Hope

Rosie's Place

Sojourner House, Inc.

Somerville Homeless Coalition, Inc.

South Coastal Counties Legal Services

St. Mary's Women and Children's Center

Travelers Aid Family Services

June 9, 2009

The Honorable Steven Panagiotakos  
The Honorable Charles A. Murphy  
The Honorable Stephen Brewer  
The Honorable Barbara L'Italien  
The Honorable Michael Knapik  
The Honorable Viriato deMacedo

**Re: Protect Shelter, Services, and Housing for Families At-Risk and Experiencing Homelessness in the Conference Committee Budget**

Dear Members of the Joint Conference Committee on the FY'10 Budget:

As organizations from across the Commonwealth that are committed on a daily basis to ensuring the well being of low-income children and their families, we would like to thank you for your recent supplemental appropriation of \$4.57 million for the Emergency Assistance Family Shelter and Services Account (FY'09 line item 4403-2120). Your action will ensure that approximately 2,900 families experiencing homelessness will continue to have the safety net of emergency shelter and services for the remaining weeks of this fiscal year.

As you continue your difficult deliberations on the fiscal year 2010 budget, we are writing to ask that you adopt the House of Representative's version of the Emergency Assistance (EA) family shelter and services account line item (FY'10 Line Item 7004-0101) with regard to the funding level, the income eligibility limit and other eligibility-related criteria, and tracking and reporting language. At a time when more families than ever are experiencing homelessness and the number of families in state-funded shelter has reached an all-time high, we know that the state needs to find ways to dramatically lower expenses and increase revenues in order to maintain a balanced budget. At the same time, we know that the Commonwealth truly is committed to advancing the goals of the Commission to End Homelessness and the Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness (ICHH). In order to reach towards the important goal of ending homelessness, we cannot afford to eliminate access to the safety net that protects extremely low-income children and their families during times of intense vulnerability and chaos.

As you set out to reconcile the House and Senate versions of the FY'10 budget, the stakes are very high for families experiencing homelessness who have incomes slightly above the federal poverty guidelines. The House version of the FY'10 budget would continue to provide critical emergency shelter and re-housing services to children and parents experiencing homelessness who have incomes between 100 and 130% of the federal poverty guidelines. The Senate's proposed budget would deny shelter and services to any family with income above 100% of the poverty guidelines. If the Senate's restriction is included in the final budget, families of three with incomes of only \$1,526 per month would be denied or kicked out of shelter – even though a family at that income level would have to spend 78% of their monthly income to afford the average 2009 fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Massachusetts (\$1,194/month)!

According to data from the Department of Transitional Assistance, during the current fiscal year, 137 families in shelter had incomes between 100% and 130% of the federal poverty limit, on average per month. If the income limit is reduced, we estimate that at least 274 children and their parents will be excluded from EA shelter and services each month. Without access to shelter or affordable housing, these families may be forced to live in cars, on the streets or in other unsafe situations.

While reducing the income eligibility limit will have an immediate effect of reducing the expenditures in line item 7004-0101, the state's costs for emergency health care, remedial education, and child protection services will offset any savings in the shelter account. The long-term harm to children will be devastating.

The impact of such a change also will be felt strongly on the community level. The regional entities, which were funded by the Legislature in the FY'09 budget and established by the ICHH to prevent homelessness and rapidly re-house families and individuals, are just beginning their work. Even with the infusion of ICHH and federal Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing funds, these networks will be overwhelmed and flooded with additional families seeking services because they are no longer eligible for EA. Organizations such as the Interfaith Hospitality Networks that provide non-state funded shelter for families ("community rooms") already are at capacity. The mission of our Commonwealth, our schools, community health centers, and other social service organizations to maintain healthy families will be compromised.

At the same time the Senate has proposed cuts to EA eligibility, funding for the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP, line item 7004-9024) is in jeopardy. We urge you to adopt the House's funding level of \$35.8 million for MRVP. We know that if the very low-income families currently participating in the MRVP program lose their housing subsidies, the demand for EA shelter and services certainly will increase. A combined strategy of maintaining affordable

housing resources, preventing homelessness, and securing the safety net must be employed if we are to not back-track on our path towards ending homelessness.

**We therefore ask for your leadership in ensuring that the eligibility restrictions for access to the Emergency Assistance program and major spending cuts to the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program do not go forward.**

Thank you very much for your consideration of these important matters, and your commitment to our Commonwealth's children and families.

Sincerely,

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Jeanine Murphy  
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Sr. Margaret Leonard, LSA  
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Project Hope

Judy Beckler  
President  
St. Mary's Women and Children's Center

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Horizons for Homeless Children

cc: The Honorable Therese Murray, Senate President  
The Honorable Robert A. DeLeo, Speaker of the House