

Testimony submitted in support of H.783/S.847 and H.2359/S.777

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I am a physician who sees patients in homeless shelters throughout Boston, and every day I see first hand how current criminal justice policy traps well-meaning people attempting to better their lives, well after they have served their sentences.

On a regular basis, I see patients who arrive at the shelter after serving their sentence. In fact, up to 20% of individuals leaving corrections end up in a shelter. In so many cases that I see, these individuals are trying to work and find housing, and ultimately contribute to society, but are hamstrung. Even in a liberal state like Massachusetts, former felons have difficulty finding a job. Even if a newly released person can find a job, the cost barrier to get into housing (security deposits plus first and last month's rent, additional fees) can be overwhelming. Even if one of these individuals manages to earn and save enough money to overcome the cost barrier, having a record of a felony is a barrier to housing through many programs and for many landlords. It is the worst feeling in the world to see the hope die out of people's eyes as they try hard to find work, find housing, improve their lives and contribute to society, but see that their felony status is an insurmountable burden to those things.

What is the result of current policy in MA? A group of people permanently cast off from society, condemned to homelessness, and vulnerable to, among other things, substance use, opioid addiction, and death. The rhetoric at the shelters is that if guests work hard and stay sober they can become housed and meaningfully contribute to society again, however, in reality, our current criminal justice system with the long-term impact of crimes, often small-scale, committed well in the past, is set up for them to fail. The men and women affected are some of the ones we see at intersections in Boston panhandling for cash, looking for support when state-level policy and structures are built up against them.

A recent end to the federal funding for the SOAR (SSI/SSDI, Outreach, and Recovery) program at our shelter has exacerbated this problem. Previously, guests in the shelter who held a job and avoided substance use could work toward the SOAR program—a guaranteed bed (so they could arrive at the shelter at the end of a shift at work, no matter when that might be), additional case

management support, and a community of like-minded individuals. As a result of the closing of SOAR, shelter guests have had to shorten their work shifts or even quit their jobs so they can make it back to the shelter in time to get a bed.

The bills before the House and Senate that would bring MA policy in line with most other states with regard to who is counted as a felon, and remove poverty (i.e., fees and fines) as an exacerbating factor for felony status. These bills would bring back hope to a group of people who up until now are without it.