February 28, 2019

Dear Senator/Representative _____:

As your constituent, I ask for your strong support for the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless' FY'20 budget priorities. The need for deeper investments in homelessness prevention, housing, and safety net programs remains strong.

In particular, please do all you can to make sure that the FY'20 budget includes the following language and funding:

1. Increase funding for the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition Program (RAFT, Line Item 7004-9316) and establish an upstream homelessness prevention pilot program within RAFT to help households pay off rent arrearages:

- Increase overall funding to $27 million. This would be a $7 million increase over the FY'19 funding level in the RAFT line item. The Governor has recommended level funding the program at $20 million for FY'20, but with $4.7 million coming from the Housing Preservation and Stabilization Trust Fund. l

- Use the recommended $7 million increase to pilot the Rent Arrearage Assistance Program (RAAP) to begin to provide upstream homelessness prevention resources to households that have fallen behind on rent or mortgage payments but are not yet in the eviction or foreclosure process. (See House Docket 2395, An Act to further provide a rental arrearage program.) Currently, RAFT program guidelines do not allow households to access RAFT for rental or mortgage arrearages until later in their housing crises. This gap in funding availability too often leads to unnecessary losses of housing and increased stress on households facing housing instability.

- Maintain the current expanded definition of family that covers households of all sizes and configurations so as to allow families with dependent children, unaccompanied youth and adults, and families without children in the household to access homelessness prevention resources.

2. Adequately fund and protect emergency shelter and service programs for children and families experiencing homelessness and support key provisions in the Emergency Assistance program line item (EA, Line Item 7004-0101):

- Provide $180 million or adequate funding to meet the needs of all eligible families. For FY'19, the anticipated spending level is at least $175.2 million, including a pending request for $19.3 million in supplemental funds. The Governor has requested $177.9 million for FY'20.

- Include language and funding to provide shelter to families who are at "imminent risk of staying in a place not meant for human habitation". Under current EA regulations, otherwise eligible families that are within 24 hours of staying in places not meant for human habitation can be turned away from shelter, even if the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) believes that the family will be forced to stay in a car, emergency room, transit station, or other place unfit for human habitation. Massachusetts can and must do better for its most vulnerable families. Based on the state's own data, 645 families with children had to sleep in cars, bus stations, emergency rooms and other unsafe places in FY'18 (July 2017 through June 2018) *before* they were found eligible for emergency shelter through the state's Emergency Assistance (EA) program (17% of all families approved). In the first six months of FY'19, another 283 families were approved for EA only after staying in such dire circumstances (16% of all families approved, for an average of 47 families/month). Since the policy was implemented in late 2012, over 3,600 families were approved for EA only after staying in such dire circumstances. These numbers do not include additional families who have stayed in unsafe places and never were approved for shelter.

- Allow families to maintain EA eligibility until they reach 200% of the federal poverty guidelines (FPG), instead of only 115% FPG, while also maintaining the over-income grace period, which currently kicks in after a family exceeds the EA income limit for at least 90 days.

- Continue to include FY'19 budget language that the Administration must notify the Legislature at least 90 days before implementing any negative changes to the EA program and language requiring placements of up to 30 days for families that appear eligible but need some more time to get all the requested verifications ("placements pending verification"). Include additional tracking and reporting language to better understand which families are served and which are not served by the program.

- Maintain language in the related DHCD administrative line item (7004-0099) to maintain access to in-person applications for families seeking shelter. Language in the FY'19 budget requires DHCD to take applications in the 10 cities and towns where DHCD had staff as of January 1, 2018, and prohibits DHCD from shifting to a remote-access only system, in which families would have to use a phone, computer, or other technology to apply or forego applying. Such language this year has meant that DHCD had to begin once again taking in-person applications from families in Lowell.

3. Address the needs of unaccompanied youth and young adults who are experiencing homelessness by increasing funding to $5 million for housing/wraparound support services under the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) youth and young adult homelessness program, Line Item 4000-0007.

- Increase funding from $3.3 million to $5 million for FY'20. A $5 million investment would provide deeper funding for the unaccompanied youth homelessness law, M.G.L. Chapter 6A, Sections 16W and 16X, so as to better serve and partner with youth and young adults age 24 and younger who are without homes. This would be a $1.7 million increase over both the FY'19 funding level and the Governor's proposed FY'20 funding level.

- Funds would be used for housing, wraparound services, and supports for young people experiencing homelessness without a parent or guardian, and to continue the work to build up regional Youth Action Boards.

- For the first time since the inception of the line item in FY'16, youth in every region of the state are benefitting from the program. For FY'19, EOHHS is contracting with 10 regional agencies. The current lead regional agencies are Barnstable County Department of Human Services, Bridge Over Troubled Waters, Catholic Social Services, City of Springfield, Community Action Pioneer Valley, Community Teamwork, Father Bill's & MainSpring, L.U.K. Crisis Center, Inc., Lynn Housing Authority & Neighborhood Development, and South Middlesex Opportunity Council. In previous years, state funds were not available to programs on the South Shore or Cape Cod and the Islands. Increased funds would support this statewide work.

4. Increase funding for the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP, Line Item 7004-9024).

- Increase funding to $130 million to maintain existing services and benefits to households currently served by the program and to significantly increase the number of low-income households (including families, elders, and persons with disabilities) struggling with housing instability who could be served by the program. This would be a $30 million increase over both the FY'19 funding level and the Governor's proposed FY'20 funding level.

- Include language to tie rent subsidy levels to current fair market rents (FMR) to make the subsidies more useful to households. Currently, households without waivers only can rent units at or below the 2005 FMR for their area.

I also ask you to please support the Coalition's additional FY'20 budget priorities outlined at
www.mahomeless.org/images/FY20_Budget_Priorities_2-26-19.pdf

I look forward to hearing from you and your staff on the actions you plan to take in support of housing, homelessness prevention, and emergency resources for people experiencing homelessness and housing instability. Thank you for your attention and dedication!

Sincerely,

First Name:_____ Last Name:_____

Address:_____ City/Town: _____ Zip:_____

Email:_____ Telephone:_____