



ON SOLID GROUND COALITION
BUILDING OPPORTUNITY, PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS

June, 2019

The Honorable House Chair Kay Khan The Honorable Senate Chair Cindy Friedman
Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities

RE: Testimony in Support of S.31 An Act Providing For Coordinated Data And Assistance To Address Family Homelessness

Dear Chairwoman Khan, Chairwoman Chang-Diaz and Distinguished Members of the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of *An Act Providing For Coordinated Data And Assistance To Address Family Homelessness*.

The On Solid Ground is a cross sector group of 40+ partners led by Center for Social Policy, Citizens' Housing And Planning Association and Homes For Families. We are committed to a research based and family centered approach to ensuring economic mobility and housing stability for families living in Massachusetts. Our vision is that families have safe stable homes, in communities of their choice and opportunities for economic mobility and wellness.

Cliff Effects - Barriers to Economic Mobility for Families

Today, a family must earn \$28.64 in order to be able to afford a two-bedroom apartment in Massachusetts¹. **Many families struggle on lower wage jobs don't earn enough to pay for housing** and other basic needs like food, healthcare, transportation and childcare. Many families rely on public benefits such as housing vouchers, childcare vouchers, SNAP benefits, Medicaid and TAFDC to pay their bills.

When recipients of support programs begin to work or get a raise, they often experience an economic penalty because of the steep decline in their benefits which leaves them worse off than prior to getting a job or a raise. **These setbacks, referred to as "cliff effects", are a barrier** for families trying to achieve economic independence and financial stability. The cliff effects are pronounced between the wage of \$14/hour - \$22/hour, where families are worse off with loss of supports even though their incomes are increasing. Many state and federal assistance programs use varying definitions of homelessness and assistance is often tied to complicated eligibility criteria. The complex service delivery system makes it difficult for families to access support across state agencies and makes progress tracking difficult for the Commonwealth.

¹ Out of Reach Report 2019, the high cost of housing (State of Massachusetts). National Low Income Housing Coalition. https://reports.nlihc.org/sites/default/files/oor/OOR_2018.pdf

Need for Streamlining and Reporting Data to Reduce Cliff Effects

In order to move the needle forward on reducing the cliff effects, we need more data on how programs are being utilized and how different programs are interconnected and serving the same families through different agencies. The agencies that administer these assistance programs are key stakeholders in collecting and analyzing the data and regulating program rules. There is an urgent need for establishing cross-agency systems and policy changes that can make it easier for the agencies to better serve the families and for families to navigate through different programs. The administration is currently working on multiple cross-agency efforts and streamlining data that will help better understand cliff effects.

S.31, An Act Providing For Coordinated Data And Assistance To Address Family Homelessness

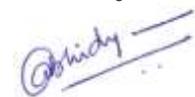
On Solid Ground respectfully requests that the Committee report out favorably S.31, An Act Providing For Coordinated Data And Assistance To Address Family Homelessness, sponsored by Senator Joanne Comerford.

Consistently reporting on the homelessness measures and streamlining data systems between the Executive Offices of Health and Human Services, Housing and Economic Development, Labor and Workforce Development and Education will aid in the interagency efforts currently underway to support families. This bill proposes making the efforts more transparent through annual reporting to be submitted to the Legislature, Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness, and Learn To Earn working group. The bill calls for reporting on homelessness related measures on programs like HomeBASE to better understand the utilization and success of the programs as well as identify gaps in services. These data points can help drive better funding and policy decisions to alleviate cliff effects. The bill also calls for establishing a telephone hotline at state agencies where families can call and receive information on assistance and benefits including eligibility, application processes and the connection between programs as it relates to the families. The bill proposes posting information on the hotline and the benefits calculator on the agency website - measures that will help make benefit program information more accessible to families thus helping them to access resources better.

We urge your strong support for S.31 which will ensure that families have fair opportunities for economic mobility that provide a pathway out of homelessness.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,



Abhidnya Kurve
Policy Coordinator
On Solid Ground Coalition