

May 16, 2013

The Honorable Therese Murray
Massachusetts State House
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Stephen Brewer
Massachusetts State House
Boston, MA 02133

RE: Family Homelessness in the FY14 Senate Budget

Dear Senate President Murray and Chairman Brewer,

We, as pediatricians, are concerned about homeless families who require emergency shelter in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. This past fiscal year, the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) implemented restrictions on access to Emergency Assistance (EA) family shelter with unintended but serious consequences for children's health. Under the current regulations, most families must first actually stay in a place not meant for human habitation before becoming eligible for shelter; this jeopardizes children and families' health and safety. Therefore, we urge the Senate to add clarifying language to ensure that the new Emergency Assistance eligibility categories are interpreted broadly to guarantee that the Commonwealth protects all of the vulnerable children that we see regularly in our medical practices.

Children's HealthWatch research has shown how important housing is to children's health and to family well-being. Children who are stably housed are less likely to be food insecure (a known child health risk), underweight, or to experience developmental delays. We applaud the recent increased investments in housing programs to prevent families from becoming homeless, such as the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program and Rental Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT). **Unfortunately, those programs and investments have been unable to protect the families with children being denied emergency shelter who have no safe place to sleep tonight. We strongly recommend that the Commonwealth invest in both family homelessness prevention – MRVP and RAFT—and treatment—emergency shelter.**

We know that you understand, as we do, the necessity of buffering children from the effects of family homelessness. Yet, we remain seriously alarmed about the grave medical risks faced by many children in families who are denied access to shelter. We are concerned that the new regulations are being enacted in a way that encourages families to stay in unhealthy and harmful living situations, such as with a violent partner or in seriously overcrowded conditions. Science demonstrates that such toxic stress in early life jeopardizes children's current and future health and ability to learn and to be productive citizens. It would be not only tragic, but also destructive to Massachusetts's future workforce if children in the Commonwealth were not able to receive the assistance they need to stay safe and healthy in their early years.

For these reasons we call on the legislature to add to the budget specific language to protect children's health that states the following families would remain eligible for homeless services:

- Families who stay overnight in places not meant for human habitation such as hospital emergency rooms or in cars, **as well as families who are on the verge of having to spend nights in places not meant for human habitation.**
- Families who have stayed in three or more places in the last 30 days and have nowhere else to go should be eligible under the unstable housing/health and safety risk sub-category.

- Families who live in overcrowded spaces with members of other households. This is especially important because many of our families here at Boston Medical Center live in subsidized housing where the presence of additional household members can violate the terms of the lease, causing not only the doubled up family, but also the host family to be evicted and become homeless.
- Particular assistance should be provided to physiologically vulnerable populations (such as pregnant women, families with newborns and families with children with special healthcare needs) to protect them from dangerous living situations whether the danger arises from unsafe physical conditions, crowding, or threatened or actual violence. Our research and that of other groups, shows that women who are homeless while pregnant are more likely than otherwise similar women to deliver low birth weight infants, who require expensive medical care in the neonatal period and often through the lifespan.

We also urge the Senate to invest in the following programs:

- Extend HomeBASE rental assistance benefits and/or other resources to families timing out of the program so that those more than 5,000 families do not have to return to homelessness.
- Make the necessary increased investments in housing, homelessness prevention, and safety net programs in FY'14.

We wrote letters to you both last summer expressing our concerns that the new eligibility restrictions would have an adverse effect on child health and development. We echo our earlier sentiments here; if vulnerable children, pregnant women and families are denied shelter, the resulting avoidable increases in costs to the Commonwealth will be incurred immediately in health care settings, and for decades to come in our educational system. Your leadership is needed to encourage legislators to work with the medical and family advocacy communities to resolve differences in understanding and to protect children whose families experience unstable housing.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,



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