

Testimony
Before the Joint Committee on Housing
Boston, MA

Tuesday, August 22, 2017

Dear Chairman Boncore, Chairman Honan, and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Housing:

I am pleased to submit testimony in support of three pieces of legislation before this committee: “An Act relative to the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP)” (S.719), “An Act relative to interagency efforts to reduce and prevent homelessness” (H.2245/S.725), and “An Act relative to the economic mobility and stability program” (H.3020/S.724). I’m Allison Bovell-Ammon, Deputy Director of Policy Strategy for Children’s HealthWatch, a non-partisan network of pediatricians, public health researchers, and children’s health and policy experts committed to improving the health young children and their families by informing policies that address and alleviate economic hardships. Children’s HealthWatch is a member of the On Solid Ground Coalition and we are honored to join our colleagues in supporting this work to reduce homelessness and improve housing stability.

At Children’s HealthWatch, we know that a safe, stable home is crucial for early childhood health and development. My colleague, Dr. Megan Sandel, co-lead Principal Investigator and Boston Medical Center pediatrician often calls a stable home a vaccine. Homes keep children and their families healthy today and in the future and they improve the health and well-being of all our communities – just like vaccines.

Over the last two decades, Children’s HealthWatch has conducted research on the impact of economic hardships on the health and development of infants and toddlers. What we have demonstrated over and over is that where you live, particularly its stability, and its affordability matters for the growth, development, and well-being of young children and their families.¹ Yet, we know that many families across the Commonwealth do not have access to stable homes. We have found that over half of low income renter families we interviewed in Boston Medical Center’s Emergency Department have either been homeless or are on the verge of becoming homeless.²

Increasing housing stability for these families is an investment in their health. Children’s HealthWatch recently published a report estimating the United States health and education system could conservatively save \$111 billion over the next ten years if we ensured all families with children lived in a stable home.³ The urgency is now. We need policies that provide families the resources they need to live in a stable home and, as a result, prevent homelessness, improve health outcomes, and reduce health care expenditures.

The Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program is a leading state strategy for reducing homelessness by providing rental assistance to extremely low-income households. Yet, the program is in need of improvements so families are able to access vouchers without long waitlists and that the vouchers available provide adequate resources for families to afford a safe home in communities where they desire to live. S.719 puts MRVP into statute and allows for a deliberative process to improve this important program.

Families need more than a roof over their head to be stable. Our research shows that families who face economic hardships concurrently, including inability to afford rent, food, and utilities, are particularly vulnerable to poor health outcomes.⁴ Financial stability and coordinated efforts between agencies that administer social supports are crucial for families to obtain and remain in their home. H.3020/S.724 focuses on improving financial stability. This bill brings together stakeholders to study self-sufficiency programs currently available in the state, examine the impact of cliff effects families face when benefits are cut-off or reduced because of increased income, and report recommendations for a state-wide economic mobility and financial stability program. H.2245/S.725 seeks to improve coordination

between agencies that work with families experiencing homelessness and housing instability. Identifying ways to reduce barriers to programs across agencies and improve collaboration will promote systems change efforts that are necessary for improving housing stability. We have found when families are able to access multiple programs, specifically nutrition and housing assistance, their housing stability improves.⁵

The high rates of housing instability and homelessness among families with children, especially families with young children, across the state is unacceptable. But, solutions that increase access to stable homes and promote financial stability exist. These three bills offer solutions that go beyond stop-gap measures and seek systemic, long-term changes that address root-causes of housing instability and provide opportunities for families to thrive. We urge the committee to favorably report out these pieces of legislation.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Allison Bovell-Ammon
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Children's HealthWatch

¹ Cutts DB, Meyers A, Black MM, Casey PH, Chilton M, Cook JT, Geppert J, Ettinger de Cuba S, Coleman S, Rose-Jacobs R, Frank DA. US Housing Insecurity and the Health of Children. *Am J of Public Health*. 2011; 101(8):1508-1514.

² Sandel S, Sheward R, Ettinger de Cuba S, Coleman S, Frank DA, Chilton M, Black MM, Heeren T, Pasquariello J, Casey P, Ochoa E, Cutts DB. Association of Three Forms of Unstable Housing with Caregiver and Child Health in Renter Families. Currently under peer review.

³ Poblacion A, Bovell-Ammon A, Sheward R, Sandel M, Ettinger de Cuba S, Cutts DB, Cook JT. Stable Homes Make Healthy Families. Children's HealthWatch. August 2017. Available at: <http://childrenshealthwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/CHW-Stable-Homes-2-pager-web.pdf>

⁴ Frank DA, Casey PH, Black MM, Rose-Jacobs R, Chilton M, Cutts DB, March E, Heeren T, Coleman S, Ettinger de Cuba S, Cook JT. Cumulative Hardship and Wellness of Low-Income Young Children: Multisite Surveillance Study. *Pediatrics*, 2010;125(5)e1115-e1123.

⁵ Sandel M, Cutts DB, Meyers A, Ettinger de Cuba S, Coleman S, Black MM, Casey PH, Chilton M, Cook JT, Shortell A, Heeren T, Frank DA. Co-enrollment for Child Health: How Receipt and Loss of Food and Housing Subsidies Relate to Housing Security and Statutes for Streamlined, Multi-Subsidy Application. *Journal of Applied Research on Children*. 2015;5(2):Article 2.