The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has estimated that there are nearly 6,000 high school students who are currently homeless and on their own in Massachusetts. House Bill 3838, An Act Providing Housing and Support Services for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth, seeks to ultimately reduce youth homelessness and its effects through a continuum of housing and support services that are geared particularly toward youths aged 22 or younger.

**The Bill**

Bill H.3838: “An Act Providing Housing and Support Services for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth”

**Elevator Speech**

Excuse me Representative [Name]?

How do you think your constituents would feel if their children were forced into homelessness because our state wasn’t able to provide services that gave their kids basic housing? Our state’s department of education estimates that we have over 6,000 high school youth who are homeless or on their own, not including those who dropped out before hand. Many students are living on the streets, dropping out of school and becoming stuck in an environment that exposes them to violence, drugs and poor health. If the Homeless Youth Act were to be passed, we could create more housing and support services to ensure that our youth (specifically between the ages of 18 and 22) aren’t slipping through the cracks, or missing out on their rights to an education. The passage of this bill would show a commitment by the state and yourself to our youth’s well-being and future. We urge you to support this act and call Brian Dempsey, the chair of the House Ways and Means Committee. Tell him to make sure the Homeless Youth Act moves forward favorably out of the committee. It takes a village to raise a child; please make sure Massachusetts makes that commitment.
Meeting with the House Ways and Means Legislative Staff

Today, we have youth [children of your constituents] resorting to being homeless, because we cannot provide enough services to promise them housing and an education.

Our state’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has estimated that over 6,000 high school students are currently homeless and on their own. Though official, this number is not accurate because it does not include the estimated thousands of students who have dropped out of school along the way. Our youth, unaccompanied by a parent or guardian, who in some cases is unable or unwilling to provide shelter and care, are struggling. They are being exposed to violence, drugs and situations which can affect their personal health and well-being. This environment, which we haven’t been able to prevent, is perpetuating a cycle of dependence on public systems and benefits for our homeless youth.

While our state has an extensive network of emergency services, transitional programs and shelters created to combat homelessness, our system is not designed to meet the needs of our youth population. Teens are being phased out of our foster system when they are 18, but there is nothing to adjust them to the adult environment we expect them to inhabit.

The power to act is sitting in this committee. House Bill 3838, An Act Providing Housing and Support Services for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth, seeks to ultimately reduce youth homelessness and its effects through a continuum of housing and support services that are geared particularly towards youths aged 22 or younger.

The bill establishes a state-funded program under the Executive Office of Health and Human Services whereby the office will create contracts with various agencies to provide housing and support services targeted at the needs of unaccompanied homeless youth. A new line item will fund programs that provide a “continuum of housing options for this population, in conjunction with wraparound support services. These services will be formatted to address the needs of homeless youth, and may include emergency shelter, kinship home placements, short term housing and programs that help in the transition to independent living.”

We understand the need to consider the budget and finances necessary to make this bill a reality. You might argue that it is futile to funnel funds towards a population which has demonstrated a repeated characteristic of falling through or not contributing to society. However, we caution you not to think in the spectrum of the services currently in place. As we mentioned before, the services currently in place are not geared towards homeless youth. They are not geared towards the ages similar to that of the teenagers your constituents have in their homes.

This bill invests in the future of our youth. It shows a commitment by yourselves to inspire our children, and allow them to grow to be capable and efficient contributors to society. This investment will yield you a profit. Our children will be able to return to school based off of the passing of this act, and they will later pay back that debt through their own productive engagement in society as adults.

We request that you evaluate this act, reach out to other agencies to help you finance it, but most importantly, please demonstrate your commitment to our children by approving this act for the next step in the legislative process. No one believes this is the wrong thing to do. Your job is to decide how to do it, and we support this bill in one form or another. It takes a village to raise a child; please uphold your commitment so that our peers don’t have to live in the streets.

Excerpts from Campaign Journals

Kelly

Legislative Action Day

On February 29 I attended the legislative action day for the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless at the Massachusetts State House. I was able to volunteer for the entire event, first helping with check-in and registration and later helping to hand out information to legislators. During the event Kelly spoke about the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless’ Budget and Bill priorities. After Kelly spoke the coalition presented a video project that detailed the issue of youth homelessness. Finally there was a speaker panel that consisted of Representative James O’Day, a Reverend, and the program manager of the agency Youth on Fire. After the speeches the audience was able to speak and ask questions about the issues, bills, and budget priorities. I was able to hear during this time from many homeless youth who wanted to tell their story. The event was extremely informative and interesting as I heard more about the bill through actual homeless youth and legislators. After the final announcements the coalition organized packets of information on their bill priorities and tips on talking to legislators and encouraged the audience to either drop their information off or talk personally with their legislators. I was able to take the packets of information that audience members hadn’t brought to legislators to them myself. Many of the legislators were not available so I simply dropped off the
Meeting with Rep. James O’Day’s Aide, Robert Lyons

During our second trip to the State House, I went to Representative O’Day’s office. I was somewhat lost in the process of advocating for my bill. I had completed all of the assignments, but that hadn’t given me a clear-cut path to follow as to what I should be doing next. I was feeling rather helpless at the time. I didn’t think I could be much help to the effort of getting my bill passed.

This was truly my first experience at walking into a state legislator’s office. Last visit we had toured the State House, which while fun and interesting, it did not provide me with much chance to get acquainted with the politicians discussing my bill. I was nervous as heck when I walked into O’Day’s office. I was so anxious that I accidentally walked into the wrong office. After sternly being corrected, I arrived in O’Day’s reception area. Of course I hadn’t been planning on actually meeting him; I just wanted one of his aides to tell me how I could be helpful.

A young man walked out and introduced himself as Robert Lyons. He was barely older than I was, but he seemed to have years of experience. He explained that he got the position in O’Day’s office right after college graduation, and he assured me that he was as knowledgeable as O’Day was on the progress of the bill. He kept on inquiring on who I was, and I kind of hid behind my position of Student Union President. I felt that this title might save me some awkward [or what I perceived as awkward] explanations of what I was doing here. And I didn’t want to appear as a student just working on a project.

Well my approach worked. Robert was very interested to hear how much I knew about the bill. So I explained everything, for as long as I could. I think he was happy with my degree of understanding. I finally got to the point where I looked up and said, “Hey, I really care about this, but I have no idea how a student here at Brandeis can help you. Unless you want me to put up flyers, my partner and I aren’t sure how to proceed.”

At that point Robert kind of shook his head and shrugged. He had been really helpful correcting any facts I got wrong, but he couldn’t give me a course of action. So I fell back onto an idea I had been forming during class.

“What if,” I said, “What if I rallied the Student Government Presidents around Boston to help raise awareness for this bill?” He seemed to like that. After all, there really wasn’t much any student could do because the bill was locked into the House Ways & Means Committee. But Robbie thought a bunch of Student Government Presidents and their constituents calling Brian Dempsey [chair of House Ways & Means] could start getting a message across. It made sense that college students would want to advocate on behalf of others near their age.

So my first official task was to round up student leaders from around Boston, and get them to agree to all call Brian Dempsey’s office on the exact same day sometime next week. We were supposed to start and mobilize students!

Update

As of August 17, 2012, House Bill 3838, the Homeless Youth Act has not yet been voted favorably out of the House Ways and Means Committee.

For more information

Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless