Support for Homeless Youth

Provide housing and support for homeless youth in Massachusetts

Sarah Schneider ’13
Emmily Smith ’13

In 2009, there were nearly 6,000 homeless high school students alone in Massachusetts who were categorized as unaccompanied. Such youth are unaccompanied because they are “acting day-to-day without guidance of a parent or guardian.” These youth are at a high risk for a wide variety of health and safety concerns including malnutrition, depression, exposure to violence, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, and even death. House Bill 135: An Act providing housing and support services for unaccompanied homeless youth, seeks to address this issue by funding a range of housing options including emergency shelter, temporary placements, “kinship” placements, and transitions to independent living. Additionally, funds would support medical and mental health services, case management, educational and employment assistance, and other social support services. Up to five million dollars will be allotted to solve these problems in the hope that investing in this act will give thousands of youth better opportunities and the skills they need to contribute to a better future for their own lives and the state of Massachusetts.

The Bill
H.135: An act providing housing and support services to unaccompanied homeless youth.

Excerpt from Storybook
“I didn’t go to school because when I was going to school I was wearing the same thing over and over again and kids were making fun of me…I didn’t want to be like ‘I’m homeless, what am I supposed to do?’ I ended up getting fired from my job because I didn’t come in smelling good because I was spending my money on food. If we can at least get pointed in the right direction and do it for ourselves, that would mean the world to us.” [James, unaccompanied homeless youth]
“I want to be heard. I am...a young black homeless child without family...once you reach the age of 18 all of a sudden you become a toddler becoming able to ride a bike on your own. They expect you to do XYZ, but don’t even give you the help...where is our pre-school to teach us as human beings that are going to make mistakes to be independent without a guide? I am looking for your help.”

[Jody, unaccompanied homeless youth]

**Elevator Speech**

Hello, I’m Emmily and this is Sarah, and we are Brandeis University students working with Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless to advocate for H.135: An Act providing housing and support services to unaccompanied homeless youth. In order to address the health, safety, and stability needs of all youth in the Commonwealth, the needs of homeless youth must be addressed. Unaccompanied homeless youth not only struggle to find a place to sleep at night, but they also do not have families to love and support them, and there are nearly 6,000 high school students alone in Massachusetts in this position. Imagine spending each day worried about where you will sleep or what you will have to eat; these youth are not focused on their hopes or plans for the future because they don’t even know what’s going to happen to them tomorrow. H.135 will provide these youth with the safety, stability, and opportunity that should be offered to all youth in the Commonwealth by helping them find homes and other support services. You can provide opportunities to these youth by supporting this bill and asking the chairs of the Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities to give this bill a favorable report. Thank you!

**Letter to the Legislator**

Dear Representative Stanley,

It was a pleasure meeting your aide Mark on February 27th, 2013 and speaking with him about the unaccompanied homeless youth bill, H.135. Here are a few points we would like to emphasize about the bill:

As a parent of two children, I imagine you understand the stability, health, and safety needs of youth, and would wish all youth to have the same opportunities and hopes for the future that your children have. In order to support youth, I ask that you support H.135: An Act providing housing and support services for unaccompanied homeless youth.

It is estimated that 6,000 high school students alone in Massachusetts are homeless and have no family to support them. Homeless youth spend their time and energy focused on finding shelter, food, clothing, and meeting their basic needs. These youth are unable to plan for the future because they have to focus on surviving day to day. 75% of homeless youth drop out of school, 29% more homeless youth report significant alcohol use, and almost half of homeless youth have attempted suicide. When youth are focused on meeting survival needs rather than learning or growing in a safe and stable environment, they lack an equal opportunity for achieving personal success, and as a result are unlikely to give back to their communities in the future.

This Act will provide housing and support services to homeless youth throughout Massachusetts based on the recommendations of a commission exploring the issue of unaccompanied youth homelessness. The bill would give youth the stability and support they desperately need by providing a variety of housing services including emergency and transitional housing and “kinship” home placements. H.135 would also provide services such as mental and medical health services, educational, vocational, and case management services.

Five million dollars would provide these much-expanded housing options and services to youth. As a legislator with vast experience in the world of Ways and Means, I imagine you agree that five million dollars is a small sum in the vast, thirty-four billion dollar state budget. Furthermore, the educational and vocational outcomes possible for these youth with assistance could result in long-term savings to the state. 75% of inmates in Massachusetts are high school dropouts, and the state spends about $45,000 per inmate. Additionally, educational achievement is strongly correlated with financial success. Imagine how much Massachusetts could save if it invested in youth today, rather than having to support them tomorrow.

I ask that you talk to the members of the Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities and ask them to give H.135 a favorable report. Please stand with Representative O’Day and Senator Clark, the sixty-six co-sponsors of the bill, and youth across the state in your support of this bill.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

**House Ways and Means Script**

There are currently over 6,000 high school students in the Commonwealth who face homelessness. Bill H. 135, An Act providing housing and support services for unaccompanied homeless youth, is working to help these youth. This bill would find housing and support options for youth up to the age of 24 who are homeless and do not
live with a parent or guardian. The goal of this bill is to provide housing and residential stability and decrease the risk of harm that these youth face every day. This bill is asking for $5 million in funding to implement housing and services. The bill is asking for continuous housing for these youth in conjunction with wraparound support services. These continuous housing options include but are not limited to: emergency shelters, where one can stay for a period of time after they leave their previous residence; and “kinship” home placements, where youth can live in a safe environment with a family, sometimes with other family members who are not their parents.

The bill will also fund access to medical services, which include: medical help such as doctors and emergency room visits, the ability to go to a dentist, and the ability to get mental health services. Additionally, there will be funding to receive counseling; the counseling programs will encompass different options such as individual, family, and group sessions, and the youth can decide on which of these options that they want to utilize. There will also be opportunities for the youth to access education and employment services, including access to schools and other educational services as well as employment services that can help youth find stable jobs and educate them in the field they will be working, such as trade schools. The youth will also be able to work with case managers. These programs will also include those that will educate youth on independent life skills, which will give them the skills they need to live on their own in a safe and stable way.

There is a special committee created by the FY’13 budget that is working with different groups within the House, non-profit organizations, and the youth that are affected. This Committee is due to release a report at the beginning of this year with specific programs and services along with the funding requirements.

These housing options and programs will be able to access funding in all areas of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts including urban, suburban, and rural locations. These options will be able to help the more than 6,000 high school homeless unaccompanied youth that are in the Commonwealth now that do not have access to stable safe homes.

- Op-Ed

**Providing Homes for Unaccompanied Youth: ‘It’s Not Rocket Science’**

James was fourteen when he became homeless. He wandered around the city in the evenings trying to find somewhere to sleep and was once kicked out of sleeping under a bridge and threatened by the police not to return. James tried to get an apartment but was unable to afford it despite having a job. Classmates made fun of him for wearing the same clothes every day, and he was fired from his job because of his lack of cleanliness. James states that, “My experience being homeless definitely, definitely was the most horrible experience for me.”

It is the 21st century, and yet in our society there are still youth living on the streets. There are youth who resort to sleeping under bridges at night because they have nowhere else to go. This is not to speak of the other violent and traumatic situations youth are placed in because they do not have safe places to stay at night. Many struggle to make it through as a result of these challenges; up to half of homeless youth have attempted suicide, many having made repeated attempts. This is a problem that we can take action to solve by following the lead of youth advocates and legislators in Massachusetts.

It is imperative that we hear the call of unaccompanied homeless youth and provide them with housing and support services that can provide them with the safety, stability, and health outcomes that they so desperately need. There are nearly 6,000 homeless high school students alone in Massachusetts who do not have families to support them. Imagine all of the youth that you know, and then imagine if there were at least 6,000 of them, 6,000 struggling to find food and a place to stay at night. Imagine their resilience in the face of hardship, but their inability to focus adequately on their future career goals or plans for the future. Imagine 75% of them dropping out of school without a high school diploma, and 29% of them being more likely to resort to significant alcohol use now that they’re homeless. Now imagine a society in which our shared values push us to speak up for these youth and provide them with the fundamental housing and services that we would wish any youth we know to have.

These youth are our future, and based on the recommendations of the Massachusetts Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth, we can efficiently implement programs that provide these youth with homes and support. With the passage of H.135: An Act providing housing and support services for unaccompanied homeless youth, we can make the bright dreams of these youth a reality. This bill would create a range of housing and support services for these youth such as emergency and transitional shelter, “kinship” home placements, mental health and medical services, as well as educational, vocational, and case management services.

This issue is a no brainer, so please call your legislators. Give your State Representative and State Senator a call (to find them go to www.wheredoivotema.com) and ask them to actively call attention to this issue and ask that H.135 be passed to ensure the health, safety,
and stability our of state’s youth. As one youth advocate said, “it’s not rocket science.” It is common sense that we care deeply for these youth, care about the wellness of our communities, and can do much more to support their needs. Please join us in calling legislators to support our youth.

■ Excerpts from Campaign Journals

Sarah

Less than a week after the Committee meeting, we attended Legislative Action Day (LAD) at the State House on February 27th. This was an incredibly inspiring and informative event that demonstrated strong support from a variety of organizations and individuals for Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless’s advocacy items. LAD was held in the Great Hall of the Massachusetts State House, a large room that allowed for hundreds of people to gather and hear speakers present. Kelly Turley again led the event. Representative James O’Day spoke as a leading legislative advocate for this bill, and it likely was useful for the legislative aides who attended the event to see such outspoken support from a legislator.

A variety of service providers testified to the challenges faced by homeless individuals and the need for increased support services. Of these speeches, Ayala Livny, Program Manager of Youth on Fire, gave a particularly poignant explanation of what it means to be homeless as a youth and the challenges that these youth face. Furthermore, youth and homeless adults themselves spoke, which was an extremely moving part of the event and presented the faces of real people affected by these issues. This event was exceptionally useful for hearing real stories from unaccompanied homeless youth, making advocacy for H.135 seem particularly pertinent. Following the event in the Great Hall, we went to an art exhibit in Doric Hall featuring artwork from unaccompanied youth and their allies. Seeing stories expressed through art was also very moving and a clever way of harnessing art to present the problem of youth homelessness. Later in the afternoon, we met with an aide for Waltham Representative Thomas Stanley to speak to him about H.135 and pass on information from MA Coalition for the Homeless about various advocacy items. LAD turned out to be one of the most educational, well-organized, and moving events of the advocacy journey.

Emmily

This was an amazingly powerful event. This event started with speakers from the legislature and the coalition speaking about the issues revolving around homelessness in the Commonwealth. There were also speakers who were dealing with homelessness and their struggles, there were even those who spoke about their experiences with emergency assist and the RAFT programs. This was informative because I had only really known about shelter and the new emergency shelter requirements, these horrible also. This let me learn more about the different options out there. As the event progressed there were speakers from different organizations that worked with homeless youth specifically such as Ayala from Youth on Fire and a representative from YARN. They spoke about the importance of youth specific shelters and support services. These speakers really gave a sense of how these shelters and services would help these youth and achieve the bill’s goals. In conjunction with this there were youth who spoke about their experiences with homelessness and the need for these services. To wrap up the event there was an art show in the State House displaying work from these youth, they were able to speak with us about their artwork.

This event was an amazing experience, till this point I felt like I was working on this project in an abstract way it had not truly hit home how deep this problem was. Sitting in this even hearing these adults and youth speak was overwhelming it was hard to hear that the government that you put so much faith in had failed these people and was still failing them. It was very empowering to be there and take part of the movement to break the cycle of homelessness.

■ Update

As of January 22, 2013, H.135 was in the Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities awaiting a hearing date.

For more information

Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless
http://www.mahomeless.org