Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

Provide housing and support for homeless youth in Massachusetts

Dillon Harvey ’14
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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

■ Elevator Speech
Our names our Dillon Harvey and Si-Si Hensley. We are students at Brandeis University passionate about solving Massachusetts’s homeless youth rising trend. By engaging and empowering these youth we can prevent perpetual dependence on government intervention and create healthier and safer communities. We were very alarmed when we discovered there are currently 6000 unaccompanied homeless youth documented thus far, with many youth invisible to survey and falling through the cracks. H.135 seeks to reduce youth homelessness and its adverse effects by funding organizations and agencies that provide housing, counseling, educational services, and more.
This measure is necessary to prevent youth from engaging in harmful activities and breaking the cyclical nature of homelessness. Will the Representative speak with the Ways and Means Chair in support Bill H.135, and line item 4000-0300?

**House Ways and Means Script**

Everyone deserves a safe place to sleep in at night, but many youth in this state lack the stable home necessary for success. Here in our home state of Massachusetts, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education estimated that there were 5,853 public high school students struggling with homelessness without any support from a loving guardian or parent. Moreover, this is only a small fraction of the amount of unaccompanied youth in our state. Many have yet to be surveyed and those we do know about often suffer from significant physical, mental and emotional issues. These serious problems only compound their small chances to break the cycle of homelessness. Based on this, we believe that House Bill 135, An Act relative to unaccompanied homeless youth, is the necessary step to take to help this vulnerable constituency.

An act providing housing and support services to unaccompanied homeless youth seeks to acquire funding to be allocated for agencies and organizations to provide services such as emergency shelter, short term and transitional housing, counseling, access to health care, education and employment services, case management, advocacy and referral services. These funds will also go towards outreach and surveying efforts so that we can gain greater insights into the extent of homeless youth in our Massachusetts community in order to develop real, tangible solutions. We hope that you will view this bill as a small investment that will go a very long way in ensuring that our youth find happy, healthy and uplifting homes.

Keeping kids off of the streets is something we all benefit from. Decreasing the temptation and opportunities to engage in criminal activity is a foreseeable benefit of developing sustainable housing intervention for currently homeless youth. We will also recapture citizens to help contribute to our economy. Folks with stable homes are more likely to retain employment, thus giving them the funds to spend earned by their own hard work. It is always better for society when individuals can use their own money rather than relying on finite government assistance and resources. House Bill 135 is a key step in supporting homeless youth towards the direction of financial independence and overall success.

We understand and acknowledge that this is an issue advocating for funds at the same time as many other compelling initiatives, such as the Department of Children and Families corrections and the Minimum Wage bill. However, we believe the amount of services that will be delivered by this bill will bring a significant return on investment. Reintegrating these youth into society will turn them into contributing members of our community, fostering cultural and economic value throughout the Commonwealth.

Everyone deserves a safe place to lay their head at night, especially youth who have not even begun to truly live their lives independently. Thus we ask that you please give support to House Bill 135 and help these youth break the cycle of homelessness before it’s too late.

**Excerpts from Campaign Journals**

**Dillon**

Our first visit was on February 11, 2014. There my partner Si-Si and I met with the legislative aide working on unaccompanied homeless youth advocacy: Khadeejah Ahmad. It was awesome to talk with Khadeejah because you could tell that she cared about the issue and felt a personal connection to it. She and I discussed homeless youth and I expressed how it was an issue I had previously researched in the context of New York City. During the conversation Khadeejah also provided Si-Si and me with concise fact sheets prepared by the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. They describe the history of House Bill 135, the need for action and what the bill seeks to do exactly.

This information served as the backbone of the advocacy materials we prepared throughout the semester and it also gave us the contact information of Kelly Turley, Director of Legislative Advocacy at the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. Si-Si and I had a brief phone interview on February 14, 2014 with Kelly where we picked her brain on the issue and for some tips about advocating on behalf of the bill. Kelly informed us that writing and visiting legislators is useful and to make sure that we share the personal narratives of affected youth in addition to the research acquired thus far. We also learned that the bill did not have any direct opposition, but rather that the political will had to be generated so that it was not left sitting in a committee on the grounds that not enough constituents talked about it. The conversation with Kelly made me feel energized and capable of being a useful advocate on behalf of unaccompanied homeless youth, and also that I had a new ally to turn to going forward.
Si-Si

“There’s no place like home.” It’s something we’ve been saying since Judy Garland as Dorothy from the movie The Wizard of Oz, and it’s a thought many of us take for granted everyday. At the State House on March 6th, everyone was forced to consider the thought once again, if not for the first time. The film itself was prepared by Innovative Perspectives Collaborative and was a fairly comprehensive look at what it is like living on the streets of Massachusetts. With many accounts of youth, it was very much a real depiction of youth homelessness and the problems associated with it. The film also featured the organization Youth on Fire, centered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who have done a great deal to reach this population and provide support services and a crutch to stand on in time in need. From the film it was very apparent that Youth on Fire was really able to give these youth exactly what they needed – a place to live, a chance to get back on their feet, and general support. Another interesting aspect of this film and Youth on Fire was the special attention to the LGBTQ issue and its association with youth homeless.

Along with the video there were a handful of individuals who spoke on this issue. Representative Jim O’Day spoke to how and why he created this bill. However, I believe the most effective speakers were Kelly Turley and the affected youth. She really made the issue relatable and local to Massachusetts. Since she has been working on the bill since its conception, and is part of the special commission that was set up by the predecessor to the bill, she was able to speak to the value of having documentation and data representing this youth population. I think the problem with youth homelessness is that it is an easy problem to overlook and that it is not always very apparent. This event, however, really made it a visible issue and I think was very effective in persuading the public that it is a serious and important issue.

■ Update
As of September 12, 2014, H.135 was still in the House Ways and Means Committee.

For more information
Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless
www.mahomeless.org/