Since 2007, the United States has seen a decrease in homelessness of nearly 13%; yet in Massachusetts, the population of individuals experiencing homelessness has increased by almost 40%. With a large increase of individuals experiencing homelessness, it becomes ever more critical to protect these individuals’ basic rights. This bill provides a definition of homelessness and secures the rights of all Massachusetts residents, regardless of their housing status. The bill includes, but is not limited to, key rights such as the right to vote, the right to equal treatment by state and municipal agencies, the right to access emergency medical care, and the right to reasonable privacy of personal property.

The Bill

H.695/S.46: An Act creating a bill of rights for people experiencing homelessness

Elevator Speech

Hello, we are Nick Love and Cassidy Tatun. We are Brandeis students and voters from Waltham. The Constitution is fundamental to the preservation of equal rights for all people in our nation; when portions of our community are alienated and denied these rights, our dedication to justice and equality is threatened.

We are very concerned that while the number of homeless individuals has decreased nationally by 12.8% from 2007 to 2015, in that same time, the Massachusetts homeless population has grown nearly 40% larger. This marginalized and vulnerable community is at an elevated risk of experiencing assault, discrimination, and violation of their basic rights.

Establishing a bill of rights for individuals experiencing homelessness, including but not limited to the right to private personal property, to move freely through public space, and to vote, is essential to preserving the dignity of this community. Clearly delineating these rights will empower these individuals and fortify the Commonwealth’s commitment to equality for all its residents.
Throughout the Commonwealth where individuals are done something wrong. These views have led to hate crimes lacking motivation, addicted to drugs, or people who have to view individuals experiencing homelessness as people largely due to societal stigma. This stigma conditions society discrimination and crime based on their housing status nearly 40%. These individuals face a greater amount of 12.8%, while in Massachusetts this population has increased individuals experiencing homelessness has decreased by 40%. These programs have successfully educated many individuals experiencing homelessness of their newly formed rights and in turn have led to a decrease in negative experiences by people experiencing homelessness. In both of these states, there has also been no fiscal impact on the state, making it a perfect foundation to ensure the respect and dignity of all residents of the Commonwealth without focus on their housing status.

The creation of a Bill of Rights for Individuals Experiencing Homelessness would greatly help the large population of Massachusetts residents experiencing homelessness. It has been meticulously modeled from a similar bill that has passed in Rhode Island and Illinois in the past few years. These programs have successfully educated many individuals experiencing homelessness of their newly formed rights and in turn have led to a decrease in negative experiences by people experiencing homelessness. In both of these states, there has also been no fiscal impact on the state, making it a perfect foundation to ensure the respect and dignity of all residents of the Commonwealth without focus on their housing status.

With such positive results, this bill should be passed in the Legislature as soon as possible. It is vital for Massachusetts to provide residents ways out of homelessness by decreasing the unlawful discrimination against these individuals solely based on their housing status. I urge you to call, email, or visit your state representatives in the House and Senate and speak of the importance this bill of rights has on all Massachusetts residents. Speak of how these protections are for all of us, because no one can predict whether they will fall into homelessness or not. And specifically ask them to speak with their colleagues on the Joint Committee on Housing and Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities to favorably vote out H.695 and S.46, respectively. By passing this legislation more individuals will have their basic human rights protected and avoid discrimination based on often-incorrect stereotypes and stigmas.
**House Ways and Means Script**

Hello, my name is Cassidy Tatun and this is my partner Nick Love. We are students at Brandeis University and residents of the southside of Waltham. Our community, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and our nation as a whole are built upon ideals of equality and justice for all residents through the maintenance of certain basic rights. When a subset of people are denied these rights and marginalized, our ideals are threatened. At this moment, a disproportionate level of discrimination falls on individuals experiencing homelessness. We are here to ask that you support [House Bill 695: “An Act providing a homeless bill of rights” or Senate Bill 46: “An Act creating a bill of rights for people experiencing homelessness”]. Your support of this bill would demonstrate a commitment to equality and respect for all Massachusetts residents, regardless of housing status.

Massachusetts has one of the largest homeless populations in the country, and that number continues to grow even as national rates of homelessness decline. Reported rates of homelessness often under-represent the full extent of this problem. This is due to the way data is collected, as well as laws that push homeless individuals out of plain sight. As the homeless population grows, the importance of protecting the rights of this portion of our residents grows more pressing.

Individuals experiencing homelessness are at an increased risk of both subtle and overt discrimination. A person experiencing homelessness is put at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to accessing assistance programs, from food to housing to social security, due to the fact that the applications require a physical address. What may appear to be just a few lines on a piece of paper are a concealed form of discrimination. These assistance programs could be the key to a person transitioning out of homelessness, but that barrier to access instead perpetuates the problem. Please understand that correcting this problem, through securing equal rights and prohibiting discrimination, does not mean more people will receive funding from assistance programs. Its implication instead is that all residents are entitled to an equal opportunity to apply for these programs. Similarly, prohibiting discrimination in emergency medical services and by employers fosters health and financial conditions that aide an individual in working to overcome homelessness. In that respect, this bill can be a step towards decreasing, and eventually eradicating, homelessness.

Implementation of this bill would require both education and enforcement. When Rhode Island passed the legislation on which our current bill is based, the Rhode Island Coalition for the Homeless took the lead on fulfilling that educational component. Distributing water- and tear-resistant cards with a layman’s explanation of rights guaranteed to the homeless community was done without any cost to the state.

In enforcing the prohibition of discrimination against the homeless community, the state may even see financial benefits. According to former Connecticut legislator Paul Gionfriddo, the systems in place can facilitate “arrests for a variety of minor charges,” as simple as “sitting or lying on a sidewalk.” He explains that in many cases, “these arrests took place primarily because” the perpetrator was homeless. An equal right to the use of public spaces could reduce unnecessary arrests. In turn, the state will not need to pay what it would’ve cost to incarcerate those individuals – more than $1,000 per day for each person.

We request that the Chair of the Committee on Ways and Means support H.695/S.46. Thank you.

**Letter to the Legislator**

My Name is Nicholas Love and, along with my colleague Cassidy Tatun, I am a student at Brandeis University and resident of Waltham. I am writing you in regard to the need for action in Massachusetts, addressing the third largest homeless population in the United States. People experiencing homelessness are faced with increased risk of discrimination and assault. H.695: “An Act providing a homeless bill of rights,” currently in the Joint Committee on Housing, would make meaningful progress to combat this problem. I urge you to support this bill, demonstrating a commitment to equality and dignity for all residents, regardless of housing status.

Since 2007 the population of individuals experiencing homelessness has decreased by 12.8% nationally, yet during this same time, the same population in Massachusetts increased by nearly 40%. In Waltham alone, according to local services, there are nearly 100 individuals experiencing homelessness turned away from shelters on a given night. These individuals need medical care, but often face discrimination in the emergency room, forced to leave in the middle of the night and walk miles to safety.

Securing the rights of all people that may experience homelessness at a given time is vital to eradicating homelessness. By implementing a homeless bill of rights, we ensure individuals have a right to their property and give them freedom from discrimination in healthcare, employment, and voting.

There has been no substantial opposition to creating this Bill of Rights. The passage of this bill would come at no cost to the state, as evidenced by equivalent measures in Rhode Island and Illinois, so there should be no financially-driven objections.

I understand that the version of this bill introduced in the 189th session was reported out of committee favorably and hope to see that again this session. Please speak with the chair of the Committee on Housing to schedule an early hearing and ask your colleagues in the committee to report favorably on this bill.
Excerpts from Campaign Journals

Nick
The meeting with Representative Pignatelli took place in the House Chambers on my first Wednesday in the State House. Also at this meeting with Rep. Pignatelli was his legislative aide Gena and Kelly Turley, the Associate Director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. This meeting was one of the most important meetings I had due to it being the place where I got a sense of what this bill accomplishes, how it played out in the past two sessions, and what some of the challenges may be; all given to me by folks who were spearheading the initiative. While I had already known what the bill would do, its history, and the lessons learned in other states, it was invaluable to get those firsthand accounts of the bill’s process in Massachusetts. It also set me on track for knowing exactly who to target based on where the coalition’s bulk of efforts was located. What this track consisted of was speaking with as many members on the Joint Committee on Housing as possible, pushing them to have an early hearing and report out the bill favorably.

Cassidy
The greatest challenge we faced during this project was gathering stories. Gathering stories about homelessness is not a quick and easy process. It is a population that typically receives little respect or dignity and often a lot of shame surrounding the experience. The stigma of homelessness creates a barrier for people sharing their story, even if they are no longer in that situation. The fact that we were looking for stories about discrimination added to the difficulty. In order to get a strong personal account of experiencing homelessness, a trusting relationship needs to be built. I have spoken with folks experiencing homelessness during my time working at WATCH [Waltham Alliance to Create Housing], but this focused on applying for emergency assistance and other social service programs, not discrimination. Further, as a student advocate, I do not have the same capacity for follow up as professional caseworkers and our interactions seldom develop into lasting relationships. Because of this, most of the stories we utilized actually came secondhand from professionals who worked closely and continuously with homeless populations. For example, the executive director of the Waltham Day Center was able to provide numerous stories about individuals with whom she has worked. It effectively achieved our goal, but something about it felt inadequate because we could not directly collect the stories.

Update
On July 10, 2017, the bill was reported favorably by the Joint Committee on Housing and referred to the Committee on House Ways and Means.

For more information

View the Bill: malegislature.gov/Bills/190/h695
Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless: mahomeless.org