There are thousands of homeless youth across the state of Massachusetts. Because of the hardships and conditions of homelessness, coupled with their legal status as minors, these individuals face many obstacles to accessing basic and emergency health care. Previously, homeless youth have essentially had to prove their homeless status by providing financial records to show they are living alone or away from their parents for some specific amount of time. These arbitrary measures have created needless hindrances for homeless youth trying to access basic healthcare services. The bill would help this vulnerable population access the health services they need and deserve.

**The Bill**

H.2010: An Act relative to the health care of minors

**Elevator Speech**

Our names are Sara Kramer and Rachel Nathanson. We are students at Brandeis University and members of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. We’re here today to discuss the epidemic of homelessness among children and youth in the state of Massachusetts. We are very concerned that there are approximately 6,000 unaccompanied youth in the Commonwealth, many of whom are survivors of abuse, domestic violence and trauma. We have bright futures in public health and politics ahead of us, full of opportunities than many homeless youth may not have; by providing fair and equal access to health care, we give homeless youth increased opportunities for success. House Bill 2010: An Act relative to the health care of minors is an easy way to improve the quality of life for homeless youth because it makes access to emergency healthcare services easier for kids without a safe or stable home. The bill was ordered for it’s third reading; unfortunately, time ran out in the session. We need your help to keep this momentum going and get this bill passed in the current session. Young people are our future leaders; shouldn’t every child have the right to healthcare that we do? This bill will help youth who experience homelessness access these services and continue the stewardship that has made Massachusetts a national leader in progressive legislation. Will the representative vote bill H.2010 favorably out of the Joint Committee on Health Care Financing?
House Ways and Means Script
Hello [Representative/Chairman Dempsey (or staff member)]. Thank you for speaking with us today. Our names are Sara Kramer and Rachel Nathanson. We are students at Brandeis University and members of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. We’re here today to discuss the epidemic of homelessness among children and youth in the state of Massachusetts. Only through responsible planning will we help improve the quality of life for homeless youth and their housed peers. We are very concerned that there are approximately 6,000 unaccompanied youth in the Commonwealth, many of whom are survivors of abuse, domestic violence and trauma and who may not have the equal opportunities for success as students like us. House Bill 2010: An Act relative to the health care of minors makes it easier for kids without a parent or guardian to access emergency health care services. It clarifies Massachusetts General Law so that physicians and homeless youth can better understand the rights of this young population. The bill was ordered for its third reading; unfortunately, time ran out in the session. We need your help to keep this momentum going and get this bill passed in the current session.

Massachusetts has been a leader in healthcare services for years now through programs like MassHealth and by expanding Medicaid services. Help us continue that trend by making H.2010: An Act relative to the health care of minors a reality.

We understand that finances are an important consideration of any bill, and H.2010 is no exception. Fortunately, no additional budget allocations will be necessary, as money has already been allocated in the Commonwealth for health services for homeless youth; these funds are simply not being used to full capacity. For instance, programs like Medicaid and CHIP are available for many youth who experience homelessness, yet few know how to access these services or are aware that they even exist. There is a distinct lack of awareness and education regarding health care accessibility for homeless populations.

Emergency care is often a last resort and is thereby far more expensive than other basic health services. Even though everyone in Massachusetts can receive emergency healthcare when required, homeless youth face distinct barriers to accessing these services. Homeless minors’ fears of being arrested or taken by child services, coupled with physicians’ fears of liability, prevent this population from seeking or receiving these vital services. The often unsafe living arrangements faced by homeless individuals also contribute to their necessity of care because they are more likely to need these services due to their circumstances.

Accessibility of emergency services for youth who experience homelessness also acts as a preventative measure by making sure their conditions do not worsen.

If, for example, they can obtain necessary medications possible complications are prevented as well. Perhaps most significantly, by providing emergency and prevention-based health services through bills like H.2010 we can actually reduce the state’s overall healthcare burden by reducing the use of costly, non-preventive services (e.g. surgeries related to cancer screenings). Therefore, the favorable passing of this bill would both allow youth who experience homelessness to get the care they need before their condition escalates to the point of seeking out emergency services, prevent higher healthcare costs and minimize barriers they face to accessing these essential health services.

By providing fair, equal and vital access to health care, we give homeless youth increased opportunities for success. Will the representative vote bill H.2010 favorably out of the House Ways and Means Committee?

Letter to the Legislator
We are writing to you as students at Brandeis University, constituents of Waltham, and members of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. Thank you for accepting our testimony on H.2010, An Act relative to the health care of minors. We have chosen to work on this bill in our class, Advocacy for Policy Change, and advocate for the rights of homeless youth in partnership with MassEquality, the aforementioned Coalition, and youth shelter Y2Y.

On Thursday, March 3rd, hundreds of Massachusetts residents convened at the State House for Legislative Action Day. Individuals who have experienced homelessness gave testimony, sharing tearful reflections of their life experiences. Angry advocates frustrated at the lack of funding spoke passionately about the need for issues pertaining to homelessness to be made a priority. Senate Majority Leader Chandler, a member of the Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth, rallied constituents, encouraging them to speak to legislators and “hold our feet to the fire [on priority homelessness issues]...we need them, you need them, the Commonwealth needs them!” The event was a grandiose call to action for Massachusetts legislators to step up and champion for the rights of homeless people across the state.

However, homeless youth are too often left out of these conversations, though they need social services perhaps more than their adult counterparts. Violence or abuse are overwhelmingly the main reasons young people leave home and become homeless. In Massachusetts alone, there are an estimated 6,000 homeless youth dispersed throughout the state. This number is approximate, as unaccompanied youth are difficult to track due to their lifestyle, cycling from shelter to street.
While homeless youth deal with problems that the general homeless population faces – stigmatization, exposure to the frigid New England elements, lack of affordable housing, barriers to healthcare, mental health issues, and so on – this invisible population suffers from a unique set of challenges. The most concerning of these is an inability to access basic healthcare services due to the legal age of consent. And so, we call on you today to support H.2010: An Act relative to the health care of minors. The purpose of this legislation is to diminish the barriers to primary and emergency healthcare services for homeless youth. Healthcare providers have in the past been hesitant to provide care for homeless minors due to liability issues. By changing legal language in a section of Massachusetts General Law pertaining to the emergency treatment of minors, a legal obligation to obtain the consent of a parent or guardian for emergency services will no longer bind doctors from providing care in dire circumstances.

Massachusetts has been a leader in providing support and services to homeless youth. By backing this bill, we will prove our continued commitment to lifting up the most marginalized populations throughout Waltham and the Bay State. If you have any questions about this bill or require any other additional information, please do not hesitate to contact us.

For more information
View the Bill: malegislature.gov/Bills/189/House/H2010
Y2Y: y2yharvardsquare.org

Rachel
As we entered the office of the Joint Committee on Health Care Financing, I noticed something I hadn't before. There were photographs on the wall, a project done a year or two ago with photographs and stories about the lives of homeless folks around the Commonwealth. As experiences color your perception of your surroundings, the information your senses take in can shift. I had never noticed the pictures before, nor thought to ask their history. Even with some of the difficulties we'd faced and the barriers of bureaucracy to our advocacy efforts, it was comforting to know that others had come before us to raise awareness about the plights of homeless populations in Massachusetts.

■ Update
On June 20, 2016, the bill was read for a second time in the House and ordered to a third reading.

Excerpts from Campaign Journals
Sara
I met with Lauren Gabriel, the Legal Resources Director at Y2Y in Cambridge, on 4/5/16. We discussed what the bill does, I answered some questions for her about it, how their organization can help us, and how we can help them. I thought the meeting would be more guided towards talking about homeless youth and the obstacles they face related to health care on the policy side in a more general sense but it developed into more of a discussion about what H.2010 would do, why it matters, and why these unaccompanied homeless youth have trouble accessing these services to begin with. This meeting was important because it involved reaching out to another organization that supports people who experience homelessness and explaining why this bill is important and how Y2Y can help us (ex: implementation of the bill if it passes). For example, they can reach out to legislators, other organizations, and get support from some of their clients who are directly affected by this legislation.