



Metro Housing|Boston
Testimony Regarding “An Act to Promote Housing Choices” (H. 3507)
by
Chris Norris, Executive Director
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Good morning Chairman Crighton, Chairman Honan, and members of the committee. My name is Chris Norris, and I am the executive director of Metro Housing|Boston, a not-for-profit organization. We provide innovative and personalized services that lead families and individuals to housing stability, economic security, and an improved quality of life. I am also a CHAPA board member and co-chair of CHAPA's homelessness committee.

Metro Housing works with residents of more than 30 cities and towns across the Greater Boston region. The people that we serve have average annual incomes of \$15,000 for a family of three. Metro Housing supports increasing the supply of housing with an emphasis on housing for those who are most in need.

I am here today to testify regarding H. 3507. The bill may increase housing production in those communities that voluntarily choose to do so. However, as drafted, it will not have a significant impact on those families who seek assistance from my organization. Therefore, Metro Housing asks that the committee, if it reports a bill out favorably, include components similar to those in H. 1288 and S. 775 filed by Chairman Honan and Senator Boncore as well as S. 799 filed by Senator Eldridge. At a minimum, Metro Housing believes that a bill should include both production goals that can be tracked as well as an annual report that describes what is built, where it is built, and who it serves. A data-driven administration should want nothing less.

Requiring every municipality to provide an area where multi-family housing can be built as of right is important because, we know that more than half of the multifamily units permitted over the last five years were in just five cities and towns . . . and more than half of the cities and town in Massachusetts did not permit any multifamily housing in the past decade.

Despite the best of intentions, incentives alone are not sufficient to produce affordable housing, let alone housing for the 250,000 extremely low income households who are spending more than half of their income on rent. During the 14 years since Chapter 40R passed, more than \$20 million has been spent on incentives and bonuses, yet only about 1,500 affordable homes have been developed, and very few, if any, can be accessed by families who are homeless or those most at risk of becoming homeless.

There are those who have suggested that if the legislature passes the Housing Choices bill now, without any changes, that later we can come back and focus on deep affordability and address the gap of 141,000 homes needed by families who have extremely low income that was identified last month by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. Frankly, I think the people we work with are wary of anyone who says, If you give me what I want now, then later I will give you what you need.

Massachusetts is known for its strong support of affordable housing. We developed state public housing, and our state rental assistance program existed before the Section 8 program. Unfortunately, the new production of state public housing has dwindled, and the state voucher program serves half as many people as it did 30 years ago.

Massachusetts is also part of a negative trend. Another report, this one prepared for The Boston Foundation, showed that "Since FY2008, Massachusetts has experienced one of the largest increases in family homelessness in the country." The "length of stay in shelter . . . continues to increase" and is approximately 350 days in our region."

In 2000, the Department of Transitional Assistance supported "a total shelter capacity for 993 families." Today, despite many years of housing production, that number is approximately 3,500. It is clear, as The Boston Foundation report concluded, "The stock of affordable housing as well as funding to subsidize housing to increase its affordability is insufficient."

The impact of this shortage can be seen every day in the lobby at Metro Housing. It is represented by our neighbors who have nowhere else to turn. There are 34,000 households who are on our waitlist for rental assistance. They face a ten year wait to get to the top of that list. Even those who reach the top of the list face difficulties. It takes between three and four months for most families who obtain a voucher to find an apartment and move in. The cost to house a family in shelter for those four months can exceed the annual amount of assistance provided by the voucher.

Therefore, although Metro Housing supports an increase in housing production, we also ask that the committee take steps in the legislation, both directly and by connecting additional affordability resources to production, to ensure that a significant amount of the new housing produced be affordable and accessible to families who currently have no other option but to languish in emergency shelters because of the lack of housing.

Thank you.

Housing those most in need: One step forward and two steps back

Did you know?

- In 1990 Massachusetts provided state rental assistance to 20,000 households. Today only 10,000 households receive assistance from the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program.
- In 1990 Massachusetts invested \$126 million in the state rental assistance program. In FY 2019 that appropriation was \$100 million. If the amount from 1990 had kept pace with inflation in 2019 it would have equaled \$246 million.
- Between 2000 and 2018, Massachusetts' resident population increased from 6.36 million to 6.9 million, an 8.5 percent increase.
- In 2000, the Department of Transitional Assistance supported a total shelter capacity for 993 families. Today, the family emergency shelter capacity is approximately 3,500, a 252 percent increase.
- The authors of smart growth zoning legislation, 40R, estimated that it would lead to the construction of 33,000 new units over ten years. The legislation was enacted in June 2004. As of 2017, only 3,500 units had been built or were under construction (almost half of which had already received or applied for special or comprehensive permits.) The commonwealth has spent \$20 million in incentives.
- In April 2019, the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston found that the inventory of affordable rental housing for ELI households¹ declined between 2011 and 2016.
- The Federal Reserve's report also found that in 2016 28% of all renter households in Massachusetts were ELI households (after removing student-led households).
- The Housing Choices bill filed by the Baker Administration allows communities to rezone with 51% vote rather than two-thirds if, among other reasons, certain developments have not less than 10 percent of the housing affordable to households whose annual income is less than 80 percent² of the area wide median income.
- There are almost 350,000 very low and extremely low income households spending more than 50 percent of their income on rent. This is more than double those in the low income, near median income, and above median income groups combined.

For more information contact

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¹ \$32,000 for a family of three in the Boston area.

² \$80,300 for a family of three in the Boston area.