

Email to: JointCommittee.Children&Families@malegislature.gov

Sept 18, 2023 DATE

Re: Testimony in support of H.187/S.117 *An Act Protecting Safety Net Access For Massachusetts Residents* and H.135/S.76 *An Act Establishing Basic Needs Assistance For Massachusetts Immigrant Residents*

Dear Chair Kennedy, Chair Livingstone, and Members of the Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities,

On behalf of or (your organization or if individual, list your city of residence and your connection to this issue) and the community members we serve, we appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony on the importance of prioritizing and passing H.187/S.117 *An Act Protecting Safety Net Access For Massachusetts Residents* and H.135/S.76 *An Act Establishing Basic Needs Assistance For Massachusetts Immigrant Residents*. Both of these proposed legislation will play a key vehicle in meeting the needs of our vulnerable residents.

(Provide a description of your organization, its mission, and the impact it has in your community. Also, feel free here or elsewhere in the letter to insert information about hunger and its interconnection with this issue)

In 2020, the Worcester Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) relocated its physical offices from downtown Worcester. The following year, the Plymouth office closed. In both instances, the community was not informed or consulted in the decision. In Worcester, the new location, at 20 SW Cutoff, is inaccessible to their many clients who lack transportation. While there is public transportation via the WRTA, it's not easily available and presents its own barriers. One of our member organizations undertook their own research and found that a round trip from various points in the city to the new DTA location could take as long as 4 hours. That is unreasonable even for a single adult, and nearly impossible for a parent or guardian who has to take one or more children with them to appointments. When you add waiting time and time spent in the appointment, a meeting to deliver some paperwork can take most of the day. This presents a significant barrier to people who most need to access the services provided by the DTA, many of whom have to schedule appointments around a work schedule or take a full day off from work to attend required appointments.

Central Massachusetts is a wonderful hub of new arrivals and neighbors. Our new arrivals have language access issues and lack access to the technology to access DTA services remotely. Most of the time, they prefer in-person access so that they can communicate. We have heard from various LEP community members that the telephonic options can be confusing or unavailable and prefer in-person contact. We have also heard from our community with disabilities and older adult members, that many of them like the option of having in-person contact. (feel free to add your own stories as well)

When the DTA office moved, advisory members, legislators, and community members were not alerted until the final leasing plans were confirmed. This was harmful to our community as it removed the office from the downtown location where all of the services, including court services, are located. The Act to Protect Safety Net Access (H.187/S.117) would require the DTA to provide notice to the community, local legislators, and legal aid organizations before moving or closing offices, and solicit public feedback to help inform their decisions. Those who live and are part of the community should have a say as to where offices are located. Technology, sidewalks, and transportation are privileges for many. Relocations or closings need timely community feedback. Accordingly, we urge the Committee to report this bill favorably with a strong recommendation.

We also support H.135/S.76 *An Act Establishing Basic Needs Assistance For Massachusetts Immigrant Residents*. In 1996, the U.S. Congress cut core benefits to millions of legally present immigrants across the country. From 1997 to 2002, the Massachusetts legislature provided state-funded food and cash assistance to those immigrants. Most of those benefits ended in 2002. Because of this, most of these families and individuals face a 5-year waiting period to access assistance during a time when they are most likely to need it. This lack of access to critical safety net benefits harms families with minor children, seniors, and people with disabilities. It is especially critical right now as many of our cities face the challenge of assisting new arrivals fleeing climate disasters and violence in their home countries.

This bill would restore the critical benefits the state once provided. It would affect more than 10,000 immigrant families and individuals across the state. If it passes, Massachusetts would join six other states that currently offer these benefits. Immigrants are one of the keys to our vibrant culture and economy. Passing this bill would provide critical assistance to help these families establish roots and weather their early years. We are asking you to report this bill favorably out of committee.

Finally, we also urge your support on several related bills:

- S.835/H.1293 — the Hunger-Free Campus Initiative
- S.301/H.489 — The Common Start Bill
- H.144/S.75 — the Lift Our Kids Out of Deep Poverty Act
- S.150/H.85 — codifying and permanently funding the Healthy Incentives Program
- S.920/H.1594 — An Act Encouraging Food Donations
- Establishing a permanent Farm-to-School Grant Program