



MASSACHUSETTS  
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FOR THE HOMELESS

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## An Act Providing Housing and Support Services for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth, a.k.a. Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Act *House Bill 3838 (formerly House Bill 1862)*

**Lead Sponsors:** Representatives James O'Day and Kay Khan

**Co-sponsors:** Representatives William Brownsberger, Thomas Conroy, Linda Dorcena Forry, Gloria Fox, Bradford Hill, Peter Kocot, Stephen Kulik, Carl Sciortino, Ellen Story, David Sullivan, Steven Walsh and Alice Wolf and Senator James Eldridge.

**Bill History:** Reported out favorably by the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities on November 16, 2011. Reported out favorably by the Joint Committee on Rules on December 15, 2011 and referred to the House Committee on Ways and Means.

### **The Need for Action:**

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education estimates that nearly 6,000 high school students are homeless and on their own. Thousands more homeless youth are not reflected in these numbers because they have already dropped out of school. There is a desperate need for increased shelter and housing options for youth living without their parents.

### **Organizational Endorsers**

- Bridge Over Troubled Waters
- CASPAR, Inc.
- Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance
- DIAL/SELF Youth and Community Services
- Join the Impact MA
- Journeys of Hope
- LUK Crisis Center, Inc.
- Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice
- Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless
- MassEquality
- Rediscovery
- School on Wheels
- South Shore Regional Network to End Homelessness
- Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness
- Worcester Community Connections Coalition
- Youth on Fire

Youth homelessness takes its toll on both the youth and our society at large. Youth who are homeless as adolescents face bleak outcomes and can perpetuate a cycle of dependence on public systems and benefits. While many children are resilient and are able to overcome the ravages of homelessness, homelessness often leads to poor health outcomes including increased risk of death, exposure to violence, susceptibility to exploitation and high risk behaviors, and poor academic performance with increased risk of dropping out of school.

### **The Goals of This Act:**

This bill seeks to reduce youth homelessness and its adverse effects by funding a continuum of housing and support services geared specifically for unaccompanied homeless youth. The goal of these efforts is to improve housing and residential stability, reduce the risk of harm and improve educational, physical and mental health outcomes for this population.

### **Key Components:**

#### **1) Establishes a new program:**

The bill establishes a state funded program in a new line item under the Executive Office of Health and Human Services to provide housing and support services for unaccompanied youth who are experiencing homelessness.

#### **2) Defines unaccompanied homeless youth as:**

- A person 22 years of age or younger who is unaccompanied by a parent or guardian and is without shelter where appropriate care and supervision are available, whose parent or legal guardian is unable or unwilling to provide shelter and care or who lacks a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence. "Homeless youth" does not include a person incarcerated or otherwise detained under federal or state law.

- “Fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence” means a dwelling at which a person resides on a regular basis that adequately provides safe shelter. “Fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence” does not include a publicly or privately operated institutional shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations; transitional housing, a temporary placement with a peer, friend or family member who has not offered a permanent residence, residential lease or temporary lodging for than 30 days; or a public or private place not designed for, nor ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

**3) Programs funded under the act would:**

- Provide a continuum of housing options for this population provided on a voluntary basis in conjunction with wraparound support services including, but not limited to:
  - emergency shelter,
  - “kinship” home placements,
  - short term housing and
  - “Transition to Independent Living” programs.
- Provide unaccompanied homeless youth with a stable out-of-home placement and help to reunite the youth with the youth’s parent or legal guardian if family reunification is in the youth's best interest, and help to create educational and residential stability.
- Provide additional support services that may include: individual, family and group counseling; access to medical, dental and mental health care; education and employment services; case management, advocacy and referral services; independent living skills training; and provision of basic needs.

**4) The bill establishes a new special commission focused on improving services for unaccompanied youth under 22 years of age:**

- The commission would study and make recommendations on improving access to services for unaccompanied youth under 22 years old, with the goal of ensuring a comprehensive and effective response to the unique needs of this population.
- The study shall include, but not be limited to:
  - An analysis of the unique barriers to serving unaccompanied youth under age 18.
  - An assessment of the impact of mandated reporting requirements on unaccompanied youth’s access to services and the state’s ability to identify and connect with unaccompanied youth;
  - An assessment of proposals to reduce identified barriers to serving this population.
- The members of this commission would consist of representatives from key executive branch offices/departments, two members of the Senate, two members of the House of Representatives, three youth affected by the issue, representatives of certain statewide non-profit agencies, and three persons to be appointed by the Governor.<sup>1</sup>
- The bill requires the commission to complete and submit its conclusions on how to improve access to services for unaccompanied homeless youth under 18 years of age within 9 months of passage of the Act. Thereafter, the commission would submit a report annually by December 31 of each year detailing the progress made toward implementing the commission’s recommendations.

**For more information, please contact Kelly Turley at the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless: 781-595-7570 x17 or [kelly@mahomeless.org](mailto:kelly@mahomeless.org).**

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<sup>1</sup> Under the current version of the bill, the Commission would consist of representatives from the Executive Office of Health and Human Services and the Departments of Children and Families, Elementary and Secondary Education, Public Health, Mental Health, MassHealth, Transitional Assistance and Housing and Community Development; two members from both the House and Senate; three youth who have experienced homelessness; representatives from the MA Coalition for the Homeless, Task Force on Youth Aging Out of DCF Care, MA Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, MassEquality, and the MA Housing and Shelter Alliance; and three persons to be appointed by the Governor.