



**PUBLIC HEALTH INSTITUTE  
OF WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS**  
PARTNERS FOR HEALTH EQUITY

October 4, 2023

The Honorable James Arciero, Chair  
Joint Committee on Housing  
State House, Room 146  
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Lydia Edwards, Chair  
Joint Committee on Housing  
State House, Room 413C  
Boston, MA 02133

**RE: Support for S.864** – *An Act promoting access to counsel and housing stability in Massachusetts (Sen. DiDomenico)*

Dear Chair Arciero, Chair Edwards and Members of the Joint Committee on the Judiciary,

On behalf of the Public Health Institute of Western Massachusetts, I am writing to express our strong support for **S.864** because this bill will help reduce the physical and emotional harms done to our neighbors experiencing housing instability.

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, we knew that safe, stable housing was fundamental for good health and well-being.<sup>1</sup> From conducting community health needs assessments throughout Western Massachusetts, we hear repeatedly from residents and medical professionals that housing security is of the utmost importance. Moving frequently and/or unpredictably from home-to-home results in people experiencing **higher rates of chronic disease and mental illness—including suicide**—than those who are stably housed.<sup>2</sup> Even those who are *threatened* with eviction are more likely to experience high blood pressure, depression, anxiety, and psychological distress.<sup>3</sup> Children who live in unstable housing are also more likely to miss school and suffer emotionally. Families and people of color are disproportionately affected by unstable housing situations, exacerbating existing health inequities.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ["Housing And Health: An Overview Of The Literature," Health Affairs Health Policy Brief, June 7, 2018. DOI: 10.1377/hpb20180313.396577](https://doi.org/10.1377/hpb20180313.396577)

<sup>2</sup> ["The Public Health Implications of Housing Instability, Eviction, and Homelessness," The Network for Public Health Law factsheet, April 21, 2021](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Vásquez-Vera H, Palència L, Magna I, Mena C, Neira J, Borrell C. "The threat of home eviction and its effects on health through the equity lens: A systematic review," Soc Sci Med. 2017 Feb;175:199-208. doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.01.010. Epub 2017 Jan 9. PMID: 28107704.](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.01.010)

<sup>4</sup> ["The Public Health Implications of Housing Instability, Eviction, and Homelessness," The Network for Public Health Law factsheet, April 21, 2021.](#)

Given the housing crisis we are now experiencing, with a marked increase in the number of eviction filings in the Commonwealth, we must **provide access to counsel** for people threatened with eviction.

**An Act promoting access to counsel and housing stability in Massachusetts, S.864**, introduced by Senator DiDomenico, is essential now more than ever as numbers of evictions rise. In Massachusetts, only 11% of tenants have the benefit of legal counsel when they are facing the horribly stressful risk of losing their home. Most people and families that have unstable housing are poor, women and female led households, and people of color. In contrast, the vast majority landlords (upwards of 90%) have a lawyer in eviction cases.<sup>5</sup> **Municipalities in Western Massachusetts face even starker numbers.** In Chicopee, only **5% of tenants** facing eviction had a lawyer, while **91% of the landlords** did.<sup>6</sup> This bill would change that, by requiring legal representation for low-income tenants *as well as* low-income owner-occupants in eviction proceedings. We know that providing legal assistance can be helpful thanks to data from the Massachusetts COVID Eviction Legal Help Project. This effort, which helped people stay in their homes when the state eviction moratorium ended, reports that 92% of their cases resulted in positive outcomes for their clients.

**We respectfully ask you to support and favorably report from this Committee S.864, An Act promoting access to counsel and housing stability in Massachusetts.** If you have questions or would like to discuss our request, please contact me (jcollins@publichealthwm.org, 413-794-7739) or our Policy Director Andrea Freeman (afreeman@publichealthwm.org, 978-895-0960).

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Jessica Collins  
Executive Director

Cc: Members, Joint Committee on Housing and the Western MA delegation

#### **ADDITIONAL REFERENCES**

[Coucair MD, Bechara, "Housing for health: Why health cannot happen without housing," Kaiser Permanente, August 29, 2019.](#)

[Himmelstein, Gracie and Desmond, Matthew, "Eviction and Health: A Vicious Cycle Exacerbated by A Pandemic," Health Affairs, April 1, 2021.](#)

[US Dept. of Health & Human Services, "Healthy People 2023: Housing Instability Literature Summary," Office of Disease Prevention & Health Promotion, May 9, 2023.](#)

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<sup>5</sup> [Massachusetts Trial Court Department of Research & Planning, May 9, 2023.](#)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.