



March 25, 2020

Dear Governor, Leadership, Mayors, Town Managers, and District Attorneys,

The **Material Aid and Advocacy Program (MAAP)** supports and empowers community members experiencing homelessness or living in poverty, through material aid, access to resources, and advocacy opportunities. We are writing today with urgent demands from community organizers experiencing homelessness (some in shelter, some in and out of shelter, and some unsheltered), our staff and Board, our volunteers, and our allies.

We are outraged by the calls to “stay home” for people who have no home. We stand together to demand better for the people who are asked to “shelter in place” when those places are shelters without proper access to cleaning supplies, space to physically distance, and rules that keep people from practicing common-sense, life-saving harm reduction practices. We turned to our community, to people unsheltered, early, and they had both concerns that aren’t being addressed and common sense solutions.

We are not hearing or seeing the best interests of unsheltered community members in any of your communications, policy solutions, or concrete actions. And your actions around those experiencing homelessness are falling short.

We understand the desire to get money out quickly and we support that. **But we also need to say that you cannot continually fund the same systems that don’t work - systems that treat shelter as a reward and not a right, systems that punish rather than heal and empower.**

Here are five fiscally responsible, common sense policy solutions and corresponding demands that should be immediately implemented to save lives:

SOLUTION 1: Meet the immediate survival needs of those living on the street.

The Commonwealth, cities, and towns must utilize available public and private property, such as schools, churches, and private vacant dwellings, to expand drop-in centers and safe havens that offer life sustaining services and can connect people to safer spaces. Drop-in centers should be able to refer people to hotels or dorms where they would have access to showers, meals, warmth, laundry facilities, and the space to social distance.

- **DEMAND 1:** The Governor’s office shall make it a condition of the receipt of Local Aid for cities and towns to re-open at least one public facility (non-police, non-fire) providing a sanctuary

bathroom and shower for people experiencing homelessness. These same locations should offer access to food, cleaning supplies, harm reduction supplies (naloxone and syringe exchange), laundry, and information about local government orders and access to health care. These sites must not be staffed by law enforcement.

- **DEMAND 2:** Boston Common, Cambridge Common, and all MBTA stations should immediately be declared sanctuary spaces with people experiencing homelessness allowed to camp there. Each City must provide hand-washing stations, portable toilets, hygiene kits, hand sanitizer, socks, nutritious food, charging stations, and other supplies on site. These sites must not be staffed by law enforcement.
- **DEMAND 3:** Make state IDs free and easily accessible.
- **DEMAND 4:** Make public transportation and Blue Bikes free to people experiencing homelessness.

As people who experience homelessness and their allies, we want to amplify the needs of people who use drugs and people with substance use disorder.

- **DEMAND 5:** All syringe services programs must remain open with continuous and uninterrupted access to new syringes, free naloxone, and other harm reduction supplies. Public disposal kiosks for used syringes must be increased.
- **DEMAND 6:** The immediate passage of legislation to support Safe Consumption Sites.
- **DEMAND 7:** No one should ever be forced into involuntary treatment; it is ineffective and another form of incarceration. High-quality, free detox and treatment should always be available on demand.
- **DEMAND 8:** The immediate implementation of the SAMHSA guidance for Opioid Treatment Program of 14 days of take-home medication for those patients who are less stable and 28 days for stable patients. Lines are currently dangerously long at clinics.
- **DEMAND 9:** Shelters must allow people to possess harm reduction supplies. Shelters must allow people to come and go as needed.
- **DEMAND 10:** Shelter workers, healthcare workers, and others who may be first responders must receive basic information about both COVID-19 and the signs of withdrawal. People who may have COVID-19 are being dismissed as drug seeking while people going through withdrawal are not being given proper medical attention.

SOLUTION 2: Rapidly provide vacant hotel or dorm and vacant housing (including luxury units) to ensure safety for those in shelters, on the street, and leaving jails and prisons. The goal is permanent housing now.

Cities and towns must offer single rooms (such as full-service commercial hotels or dorms with individual bathrooms and meals onsite) to all unsheltered people, to all shelter residents in congregate settings, and to those leaving jails and prisons, prioritizing those who are at high risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19. This is critical because congregate living spaces do not have sufficient space to follow the Center for Disease Control guidance on social distancing. *Congregate living spaces are not healthy living spaces.* Placements must be offered on a voluntary basis and people must be able to choose where they most feel safe. The Commonwealth must provide access to social, medical, and housing placement services as needed for those in hotel or dorm settings.

- **DEMAND 11:** The Governor's office should work with the legislature and appropriate units of government to operationalize fully funded rapid-response mechanisms for hotel or dorm rooms for these prioritized populations.
- **DEMAND 12:** The Governor's office should work with the legislature and appropriate units of government to operationalize fully funded rapid-response mechanisms for permanent housing that does not require sobriety.
- **DEMAND 13:** The Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ Youth put in place a fair and equitable process that meets the needs of all unsheltered LGBTQ young people which is fully funded by the Commonwealth and has input from unhoused LGBTQ youth. It should not be reliant on youth having computer access or a mailing address.
- **DEMAND 14:** The legislature should ensure that state funded voucher deadlines are extended and additional rapid rehousing funds are made available so no one falls back into homelessness.
- **DEMAND 15:** The legislature should mandate an extension of voucher search time for those currently holding vouchers and looking for permanent housing.

SOLUTION 3: End all law enforcement sweeps, diversion, and targeting of homeless community members. This includes lifting all curfews that police are currently enforcing.

- **DEMAND 16:** Immediately end Operation Clean Sweep including all elements of the ongoing August 2 that have been embedded into MELNEA CASS/MASS AVE 2.0 such as increased surveillance at bus stops by BPD, the installation BPD fixed posts around the Massachusetts Avenue and Melnea Cass Boulevard that serve as barriers to access of healthcare, and increased use of the Citywide Bicycle Unit.
- **DEMAND 17:** The City of Arlington should cease sending tactical units to encampments with long guns and a canine unit dangerously intimidating both residents of that encampment and harm reductionists.
- **DEMAND 18:** The legislature Pass the Homeless Bill of Rights (S.76).

- **DEMAND 19:** All police departments suspend arrests for public space infractions, drug offenses, charges related to sex work, and crimes of survival that are a direct result of the pandemic. People should not be arrested or harassed for sleeping in their vehicles.
- **DEMAND 20:** All District Attorneys Nolle prosequi all motor vehicle, drug possession, trespassing, and disorderly conduct charges.

SOLUTION 4: Immediately invest in housing and healthcare for our community.

Funds should be diverted from the continued criminalization of poverty, homelessness, substance use disorder, and mental illness to a reimagined community that centers people not punishment.

- **DEMAND 21:** That the FY21 budgeting processes in the Commonwealth and in all cities and towns, despite the need for physical distancing be open and transparent.
- **DEMAND 22:** Police “outreach units” and “recovery coaches” should be defunded; funds should be redirected to healthcare and treatment run by community based organizations that better reflect and serve the needs of the community. Reallocated monies should go to community based organizations with priority given to those that are lead by and for underserved communities especially Black and Brown communities, formerly incarcerated people, LGBTQ people, sex workers, women precariously housed and formerly homeless people, people in recovery and people who use drugs, immigrants and refugees, and people who have life experiences who share many of these identities simultaneously.
- **DEMAND 23:** All police in the Commonwealth, cities, and towns should be housed in a single accountable agency meaning that school, health care, housing, park, and other police should appear in a single budget so that taxpayers understand the true cost of policing and can better determine the needs of their communities.

For those remaining in congregate shelters or moved to tents, we demand that **safety measures and increased support is immediate**. Shelters must increase support and enforce safety measures to protect homeless residents. All shelter residents must be allowed to stay in shelters and dorms during the day rather than be required to leave. Residents in shelters report providers have not increased cleaning or provided access to critical supplies, including hand sanitizer. Cleaning standards must be enforced and residents should be allowed to remain in shelter during inspections.

- **DEMAND 24:** Shelter residents must have the ability to physically distance themselves including ten feet between beds, enough space to socially distance during meal times, and enough space to distance when entering and leaving.
- **DEMAND 25:** Shelter residents must have access to WiFi in dorms and common areas and be allowed to bring in technology and use all available computers. This is crucial in allowing people to stay informed and reduce social isolation.

- **DEMAND 26:** Shelters must allow people to charge electronic monitoring devices.
- **DEMAND 27:** Shelters must allow people to possess harm reduction supplies. Shelters must allow people to come and go as needed.
- **DEMAND 28:** Shelters and other service providers (including food banks) must not ask for ID or deny services because of residency or “last known address”.
- **DEMAND 29:** Shelters shall not deny people access to services because of past or current involvement with the criminal justice system.
- **DEMAND 30:** Shelters that have banned or barred participants must introduce increased restorative justice practices.

SOLUTION 5: Ensure access to quality health care

While ensuring the containment of COVID-19 must be a priority, the Commonwealth must provide access to quality health care services to support the diverse health needs of everyone, including harm reduction services for people who use drugs, mental health services, and care for people with chronic health conditions. Continuity in care must be established for people moved to other locations (such as commercial hotels or dorms). No medical insurance should be terminated during this time and medical insurance cases that were closed must be reinstated.

- **DEMAND 31:** Medical/welfare checks should be provided to people who are sick or have been exposed. These should not be provided by the police.

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified and made acute systemic inequities that have been ignored for too long. We are demanding both immediate relief and long term solutions that address our community's life-threatening challenges at the intersection of a global pandemic, the overdose crisis, the criminalization of homelessness, and an unwillingness to use housing for shelter rather than profit.

The Commonwealth is talent and resource-rich. We are now looking for you, as a group of elected officials, to have the moral courage to act with expediency on the above solutions.

Sincerely,
Material Aid and Advocacy Program (MAAP)

For MAAP Board & Staff

Sarah Casey, Chair, Board of Directors, MAAP
Michelle Kweder, MBA, PhD, Vice Chair, Board of Directors, MAAP
Cassie Hurd, Executive Director, MAAP

For MAAP Organizers & Participants

Armando, Homeless

Aryanna, Homeless

Johnny, Queer Person Experiencing Homelessness in Boston & Cambridge

Kaylee, Homeless

Malakai, Person Experiencing Homelessness in Cambridge

Marcel, Homeless and Currently Trying to Survive in Cambridge

Mary, Sr. IV Drug User

Michael Christopher, Homeless

Patrick, Person Experiencing Homelessness in Cambridge

Ricardo, Homeless Vet in Cambridge

Shawn, Homeless

Stephen, Homeless

Terry, Homeless

TJ, Cambridge Resident and Voter

Tom, Habitat Challenged

Vanessa, Non-Binary Homeless Person

Wayne, Homeless Bostonian

Allies (List in formation)

Asian American Resource Workshop

Black and Pink, Boston

Boston Homeless Solidarity Committee

Boston Users Union

Families for Justice as Healing

Jewish Voice for Peace Boston

Justice 4 Housing

Massachusetts Bail Fund

National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls

National Lawyers Guild Massachusetts

Prisoners' Legal Services

SIFMA Now!

Sisters Unchained

Showing Up For Racial Justice, Boston