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PRESS RELEASE

Lift Our Kids Coalition Urges Legislature to Raise Cash Assistance Grants and Commit to Cost of Living Increases

BOSTON, MA (October 10, 2023) – On Wednesday, the Lift Our Kids Coalition submitted a 70-page packet of written testimony to the Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities from supporters of bills to Lift Kids Out of Deep Poverty (H.144/S.75) on Wednesday. The Committee heard oral testimony a month ago. The packet includes testimony from 22 organizations and two individuals, sharing examples of how low cash assistance grant levels harm families and children in communities across Massachusetts and urging the Committee to act on the bills, which would set a floor for cash assistance at 50% of the federal poverty level (FPL) and commit to increases in grants to keep pace with inflation.

Tiffany Jenkins, a parent who received cash assistance in the past and is a member of EMPATH's Voices Advocacy Council, testified about the challenges she faced due to low grant levels: "I used cash assistance to pay my cell phone bill, pay for my car, and get diapers & wipes. But it was very hard to make ends meet each month. I was working so hard. It felt like they wanted me to fail." Jenkins urged the Committee to take action, asking them, "Housing and food costs keep going up every year. Why doesn't cash assistance do the same?"

Aleah Tillotson, a family services manager at LEO, Inc., the community action program in Lynn, testified at the hearing about her work assisting families and reflected on her own experiences with cash assistance. "A little over 10 years ago, I was a homeless parent and a recipient of TAFDC. During that time I struggled to stretch that money out. I was responsible; it just was not enough . . . for transportation, for hygiene products, for diapers. I can recall a time I was in my doctor's office in tears asking for diapers because I just did not have enough money left," Tillotson said. "In my work with LEO, it's difficult to see that 10 years later families are still having those same struggles, I would say even worse because . . . 10 years later, the cost of living has risen exponentially."

“Families need adequate support to keep themselves and their children healthy and safe, and failing to provide it is unconscionable,” wrote Mary Coleman, Senior Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of EMPath, who testified in person at the September 12th hearing. Coleman reported one EMPath participant saying, “My kids are growing . . . They get hungrier and start eating more. I’m afraid soon I’ll have to start skipping meals if they keep raising prices.” Other EMPath parents said they could not afford essentials like “pain medication, hand soap, laundry detergent, transportation costs, winter coats and shoes.”

Medical providers testified about the impact of low cash grants on healthcare access and outcomes. Dr. Aura Obando of the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program’s Family Team, described a recent medical visit with a family experiencing homelessness: “I recently saw an infant in clinic, brought in by his mother due to a severe, beefy, red diaper rash covering his entire perineum. His skin was raw in several areas and he was bleeding, and diaper changes were excruciatingly painful for him as a result. I wish this occurrence was unusual for our clinic but we regularly see families who have to reuse or overuse wet diapers because diapers are an expense that exceeds the monthly budget allocated to families in shelter. This leads to unnecessary medical visits, missed days of daycare, and as a result, missed work for parents.”

Child welfare advocates noted that increasing cash assistance grant levels could have a positive impact on reducing involvement in the child welfare system for low-income families. “Research demonstrates that investment in, and availability and accessibility of sufficient public benefits . . . significantly reduces involvement in the child welfare system,” wrote Rachel Gwaltney, Executive Director of the Children’s League of Massachusetts. “Reports of ‘neglect’ based solely on a family’s inability to pay for certain provisions are common and put parents at risk of losing custody and other rights associated with their children. Financial support could easily fix the problem and prevent additional trauma/child welfare involvement.” Gwaltney further explained that “[i]mplementation of anti-poverty efforts would also support reduction of racial disproportionality in child welfare involvement with national estimates suggesting a 19 to 29% reduction in investigation of Black children and 13 to 24% reduction in investigations of Latinx children.”

A copy of the full compilation of testimony is available online [here](#).

[Lift our Kids](#) is a coalition of 160 member organizations dedicated to improving cash assistance programs for the Commonwealth’s lowest income children and families. The Act to Lift Kids Out of Deep Poverty, H.144 (Rep. Decker) and S.75 (Sen. DiDomenico), with 116 co-sponsors, sets a floor for cash assistance at 50% FPL. Families living below this level are considered to be in “Deep Poverty.” The bills would require grants to be adjusted annually for inflation so they don’t lose their value over time. Even with recent increases to grant levels through the state budget process, the current maximum grant of \$783 a month for a family of three with no income is still less than Deep Poverty – currently \$1,036 a month.

“I am so thankful that the House and the Legislature continue to increase resources to families living in Deep Poverty, as they have in the past four budgets,” said Rep. Marjorie Decker, the

lead House sponsor. “That budgetary commitment has significantly improved the cash assistance available to families, and this legislation accompanies those budget increases. The more we increase resources to families in Deep Poverty, the more we make intentional policy decisions to alleviate suffering and ensure families can access basic necessities, which often means needing less government assistance over time.”

Senator Sal DiDomenico, the lead Senate sponsor, testified at the September hearing: “The people that we’re aiming to help here do not have time to wait two, three, or four sessions to get the support that they need and deserve for their families and for themselves. And even though we’re grateful that we’ve had these gains, we want to see a bill passed that will address this in a meaningful way that’s sustainable over time to make sure we don’t have to rely on the ebbs and flows of the budget process every year because the people that we’re helping can’t count on that.”

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