

September 15, 2023

The Honorable Robyn K. Kennedy
Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities

The Honorable Jay D. Livingstone
House Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities

Dear Chair Kennedy, Chair Livingstone, Vice Chairs, and Committee members,

The Children's League of Massachusetts (CLM) is a statewide non-profit association of 60 members, providers and advocates of child and family services across the Commonwealth. Together we promote the availability, accessibility, and quality of these needed services that promote the safety, health, and well-being of children and families. Our members know first-hand the struggles faced by vulnerable people and their providers in the Commonwealth. We are writing today **in support of "an act to lift our kids out of deep poverty"** ([S.75](#) / [H.144](#)) which over the course of two years will bring cash assistance grants in the Commonwealth just up to half of the federal poverty level (the deep poverty level) and will directly improve family stability and child safety.

Living in poverty is detrimental to families. Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC benefiting families) and Emergency Aid to the Elderly Disabled and Children (EAEDC for elders and persons with disabilities) are safety net programs. Many caregivers experiencing poverty are forced to choose between using their constrained resources to maintain their home, buy food, or pay for essential utilities like power and water. [A large body of research](#) on guaranteed income programs and other substantial economic support has found positive impacts on child and parent mental health, child well-being, educational attainment, and parental substance use and psychiatric health. When safety net programs are underfunded or restricted, the result is children from low-income families entering the child welfare system because of stressors grounded in financial issues.

Decreasing poverty decreases child welfare involvement and improves child and family well-being. Research demonstrates that investment in, and availability and accessibility of sufficient public benefits (like cash assistance, housing assistance, childcare assistance, refundable EITC, and medical assistance programs) significantly reduces involvement in the child welfare system. 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.

There is a disproportionate number of families of color living in poverty due to structural racism and decades of disinvestment in communities of color. Twenty-nine percent of Latino children and 24% of African-American children in Massachusetts live in poverty, compared to 6% of white children ([2002 Kids Count Data](#)). Implementation 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 ([2023 Chapin Hall Report](#)).

This investment is both urgent and long overdue

In two previous legislative sessions, the Committee has favorably reported prior versions of these bills. Those favorable reports laid the groundwork for the Legislature's inclusion – after decades of frozen funding – of four grant increases in General Appropriations Acts, with the first increase effective January 2021 and the most recent increase effective April 2024.

However, even with these recent increases, 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. While the incremental increases in the budget are greatly appreciated, whether to raise cash assistance grants should not have to be a question every year. Instead, as the bills provide, grants should be increased more rapidly to the modest Deep Poverty level and then adjusted each year to keep up with increases in the cost of living.

As things are now, because grant amounts are so low, families cannot afford necessities for their children. They struggle to buy food at the end of the month when food stamps have run out. They don't have money to do laundry. They can't pay for school activities for their children. And many end up homeless or doubled-up because their grants aren't enough to pay rent.

Living in deep poverty has long-term consequences for children's physical and emotional health. Children who grow up desperately poor do worse in school – sometimes because of poverty-related cognitive challenges, sometimes because of bullying, negative self-image, not having access to a computer, or not having a stable place to live.

We urge the Committee to report this bill out favorably and secure its timely passage to bring our state's children out of deep poverty.



Sincerely,

Rachel Gwaltney
Executive Director
Children's League of Massachusetts

Supporting Members of the Children's League

Ascentria Care Alliance
Devereux Advanced Behavioral Health
Family Continuity
Gándara Center
Hillcrest Educational Centers
HopeWell Inc.
LUK, Inc.
MARE (Massachusetts Adoption and Resource Exchange)
Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
NFI Massachusetts, Inc.
Roxbury Youthworks, Inc. (RYI)
St. Ann's Home, Inc.
Youth Villages MA