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October 20, 2015

Senator Jennifer Flanagan, Chair  
Joint Committee on Children Families and Persons with Disabilities  
State House, Room 312 - D  
Boston, MA 02133

Representative Kay Khan, Chair  
Joint Committee on Children Families and Persons with Disabilities  
State House, Room 146  
Boston, MA 02133

**Re: Support for HB429/ SB94 - An act relative to ensuring the well-being of children in the Commonwealth**

Dear Chairwomen Flanagan and Khan and Members of the Joint Committee on Children Families and Persons with Disabilities:

The Conference of Boston Teaching Hospitals (COBTH) appreciates the opportunity to submit this testimony in support of House Bill 429 and Senate Bill 94: An act relative to ensuring the well-being of children in the Commonwealth. Specifically we want to address section five of the bill which pertains to shelter eligibility.

In the fall of 2012, changes made to 760 C.M.R. 67.00 et seq., the State's Emergency Assistance Program required individuals seeking emergency shelter to have previously been living in an environment not intended for human habitation. As such, many families with children and/or pregnant women are forced to sleep in cars, vans, parks, or public buildings to satisfy this requirement. Additionally many families came to hospital emergency departments (ED's) for shelter since EDs also satisfy the requirement of the regulations. These locations however are neither appropriate nor safe options for shelter.

Since the implementation of this regulation, there has been a significant, negative effect on the safe and effective operation of our hospital's EDs and increased obstacles for families seeking emergency shelter who are fleeing domestic violence. With the impending winter we fear that these challenges will only further be exacerbated.

EDs are not intended to provide shelter to families with young children; they are intended to treat individuals in need of medical attention. EDs are already overcrowded and do not possess the room or staff necessary to manage individuals seeking shelter. The necessity to attend those seeking shelter takes doctors' and nurses' time and attention away from individuals in need of medical care and only increases ED backups. Further, EDs are not being equipped to provide necessary food, sleeping or bathing arrangements to individuals seeking shelter and may unnecessarily exposed those individuals to illness or mental trauma based on their experience of other patients seeking treatment.

For families fleeing domestic violence (DV) already facing the trauma of homelessness and poverty, such

exposure in addition to the traumas associated with domestic violence can only cause more harm. For victims of domestic violence, securing a safe place to stay quickly is of the greatest importance once they take that step to leave. Yet housing within Massachusetts and the city of Boston is both high cost and scarce and spaces within DV shelters are extremely limited. Organizations offering shelter to victims of domestic violence are often unable or have extreme difficulty meeting the need of the populations they serve. For those organizations, the Emergency Assistance system is a vital component to their ability to provide victims a safe shelter.

These regulations have only created new problems and added levels of complexity for DV survivors seeking emergency shelter. For many the regulations impede their ability to leave an unsafe environment and gain safety. Further the problems posed to EDs will only increase as the weather becomes colder.

For these reasons I respectfully urge the Joint Committee on Children Families and Persons with Disabilities to issue a favorable report on HB429/ SB94 - An act relative to ensuring the well-being of children in the Commonwealth.

I appreciate the opportunity to comment on this important legislation. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Erwin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John Erwin  
Executive Director