



Volume 2 #6 Newsletter Mass Union of Public Housing Tenants September - October 2021

Mass Union's 50th ANNIVERSARY.

Mass Union testified at State House hearing.

On September 15, Mass Union Policy Board members testified virtually at the Massachusetts Joint Committee on Housing hearing.

Mass Union members are from all over the state: Boston, Fall River, Quincy, Somerville, Concord, Salem, Norwood, Springfield, Everett, and Worcester, just to name a few. Mass Union represents public housing tenants statewide on policy and is on the frontlines with tenants when they want to improve their housing or want to form tenant groups. We help leaders use and apply the laws that you create.

Mass Union of Public Housing Tenants Supports:

H. 1408 (Rep. Honan), *An Act to establish an apprenticeship program to ready vacant public housing apartments for occupancy*

H. 1410 (Rep. Honan), *An Act relative to housing service coordinators*

S. 900 (Sen. Lovely)/ H. 1407 (Rep. Honan), *An Act to prevent and respond to bullying of elderly and disabled residents*

S. 1084 (Sen. Lovely), *An Act relative to bullying in public housing*

S. 862 (Sen Brady), *An Act relative to local public housing authorities*

H. 1445 (Rep Schmid)/S. 906 (Sen Rush), *An Act relative to public housing determination for veterans*

S. 878 (Sen DiZoglio), *An Act establishing a task force on elderly and disabled person residing in public housing*

H. 1396 (Rep. Elugardo), *As Act enabling public housing authorities to borrow against real estate equity of publicly owned properties*

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784 Washington Street, Suite #504, Dorchester MA. 02124, (617) 825-9750

The Chair's Corner



Hi Fellow Tenants. I hope everyone is doing well. Mass Union will be holding a two-day convention on October 30th and 31st along with our 50th anniversary. I hope you have paid your annual affiliation dues and are planning on joining us for our anniversary party.

Mass Union has been at the statehouse virtually via zoom, promoting several bills. On September 19 – 22, I was at a live Mass NAHRO conference in Falmouth MA. The conference theme was “Heroes of Housing”. There were two board members with me, Linda Montgomery, and Renee Spencer, and we got a lot of information. There was over two hundred people in attendance.

Since our conference is celebrated over the Halloween weekend, if you wear a costume, we will give out a few prizes. So please pay your dues and send a couple of residents to the convention.

Stay safe

Phyllis Corbitt, Chairperson

2021 Fall Convention Agenda

10/29 Registration

10/30 Business Meeting

Policy Board Election

Lunch Guest Speaker

Workshops:

Fire Prevention, Fire safety

RAD Tenant's Rights

Keeping Public Housing Public

Banquet

10/31 Reconvene Business Meeting

Adjourn

American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)

Mass Union, MassNAHRO, CHAPA and Mass Law Reform Institute, collaborate to request \$450 million Federal ARPA Funds, controlled by the state legislators.

There is much for us to do to protect public housing. Currently there is \$1.5-\$2 billion of capital repairs needed for state public housing. We hope that we can collaborate with our partners to increase capital funding for public housing. Remember – your voice is important in all of these matters!

The need for affordable housing is constant and will only increase. Massachusetts has a strong public housing infrastructure in place, but it needs repair. 57% of the state portfolio is more than 50 years old. Considering the perennial need, and the \$500,000 cost of building a new apartment, we cannot as a state afford to lose any current public housing residences because of obsolescence; we must maintain and upgrade what we have. Currently, there are more than 150,000 applicants on the statewide waiting list for public housing. Extending the life of a residence at a cost of \$10,500 per apartment (total request of \$450 million for 43,000 units) is a worthwhile and smart investment. In 2018, the public housing bond bill included a record level of capital funds of \$600 million over 5 years.

Mass. Department of Housing & Community Development (DHCD) has assessed the capital backlog at \$3 billion, yet only \$55 million in bond funds is distributed through formula funding to the 240 housing authorities annually. We have identified and estimated the cost of the most imminent capital needs that affect the lives and safety of public housing residents and if not addressed could have disastrous consequences. • majority of housing authorities have outdated fire alarm systems - \$50M • underground utilities are failing (water & sewer pipes leaking or draining into streams, etc.) - \$100M • resiliency, environmental projects - \$15M • phased projects consisting of improved accessibility, plumbing and electric systems that are shovel ready but are being broken into phases over a 3–7-year period causing building to have unnecessary extended vacancies and cost significantly more. These projects must be completed under one contract in one phase to bring the units back online to serve the applicants on our waiting list. - 189 projects totaling \$235 million • shortfall in this year's formula funding allocation due to increased costs of supplies due to the pandemic - \$50 million We must balance the need for new units while preserving the existing public housing stock. \$10,500 per unit is a step in the right direction that cannot be addressed through a bond bill. Even with this infusion of funding, there remains a need for a bond bill at least five times the one passed in 2018. With this infusion, we can take steps towards preserving our units to serve our communities.

Let us join Mass NAHRO's, "Be A Local Hero" campaign. Save public housing.

NAHT Safe & Healthy Homes VISTA Project

A paid volunteer position:

The National Alliance of HUD Tenants (NAHT) a tenant-led, membership coalition of tenant groups in privately-owned, federally assisted housing. NAHT is the only national tenants organization in the US. NAHT's Safe & Healthy Homes VISTA project will seek to build the capacity of tenants in privately-owned, federally assisted multifamily housing to form tenant associations to preserve and improve affordable housing, improve health and safety outcomes in their communities, and increase resident awareness of their rights and responsibilities, including recovery from COVID-19. In its first year, the project expects to strengthen or form at least 45 tenant associations that meet HUD standards; to inform at least 4,500 low income tenants of their rights; and to commence the preservation or improvement of at least 4,500 at-risk apartments as decent, safe and affordable housing. 15 VISTA members placed at up to 12 host sites will perform activities such as doorknocking and distributing information to tenants in their homes; helping tenants convene building-level meetings to identify concerns; and assisting tenants to meet with owners, HUD and others to save and improve 4,500 homes per year over the five year course of the project. Project sites currently recruiting for an August 2 start date are located in: Boston, MA; New York City; Chicago; Syracuse, NY; Newark, NJ; Nashua, New Hampshire; Little Rock, AR; and Long Beach, CA

Further help on this page can be found by [clicking here](#).

Member Duties : As a NAHT VISTA member you will gain a deep understanding of federally-supported housing in your local community, inform tenants of their rights, and help organize effective tenant associations. Your work will be critical to preserving and improving quality affordable housing across the nation. You will forge and strengthen local partnerships to support tenants and help build strong and lasting tenant leadership and capacity. Your day to day work will consist of tenant outreach and training. NAHT host sites are located in nine cities across the US and represent a wide array of geographies and locales.

Program Benefits : Health Coverage* , Relocation Allowance , Childcare assistance if eligible , Choice of Education Award or End of Service Stipend , Training , Stipend .

*For details about AmeriCorps VISTA healthcare benefits, please visit <http://www.vistacampus.gov/healthcare>

Terms :
None

Service Areas :
Community Outreach , Housing , Neighborhood Revitalization , Community and Economic Development .

Skills :
Public Speaking , General Skills , Community Organization , Conflict Resolution , Team Work , Recruitment , Communications , Leadership .

SUMMARY	
Program Type:	AmeriCorps VISTA
Program	NAHT Safe & Healthy Homes VISTA Project
Program Start/End Date	09/01/2021 - 08/27/2022
Work Schedule	Full Time
Education level	High school diploma/GED
Age Requirement	Minimum: 21 Maximum: None
Program Locations	NEW JERSEY , MASSACHUSETTS , NEW HAMPSHIRE , CALIFORNIA , NEW YORK , ILLINOIS , ARKANSAS Chicago , Boston , Los Angeles/Orange County , New York City (inc. Long Island CT NJ NY)
Languages	English

Accepting ApplicationsFrom 06/16/2021 To 07/30/2021

ContactMichael Kane
42 Seaverns Ave
Jamaica Plain MA 02130
781-844-7431

Listing ID105004

RIGHT TO COUNSEL

At some point, everyone [has heard something like this on TV](#): "You have a right to a lawyer. If you cannot afford one, one will be provided to you." In 1963, in the celebrated case of *Gideon v. Wainwright*, the Supreme Court said that individuals charged with serious crimes have a right to counsel. The Court later expanded the right to [juveniles charged with delinquency offenses](#) and [people charged with misdemeanors](#).

Yet many people do not realize that this broad right only applies to criminal cases, not civil cases; the Supreme Court's approach to civil cases has been considerably less protective. As a result, the right to counsel in civil cases depends on [what state you're in and what type of civil cases it is](#). Overall:

- There is no state that guarantees a right to counsel for a person in cases involving housing or access to health care;
- Very few states provide a right to counsel for domestic violence or private custody proceedings;
- Fewer than half the states guarantee counsel for those being jailed for failing to pay child support or a criminal fee/fine.

This has contributed to the ever-growing [justice gap](#) and actually [worsened the indigent defense crisis](#). In fact, the [United States now lags far behind the rest of the world](#) when it comes to the right to counsel in civil cases.

WHY PEOPLE NEED COUNSEL AND HAVE TROUBLE GETTING IT

Having a lawyer in critical civil cases can make the difference between keeping a home or losing it, obtaining protection from domestic violence or suffering injury, having sufficient food or going hungry, keeping a family together versus having it split apart, or remaining free versus being incarcerated. But the ultimate consequences of losing these types of civil cases extend beyond these immediate effects. When people lose their homes or children, or experience domestic violence that they cannot stop, they often have problems with school and employment, experience psychological problems, and are forced to use publicly-financed medical care, shelter and benefits systems. Thus, not only does losing the case affect them in multiple ways, but all of society bears the cost in a way that is significantly more expensive than paying for counsel in the first place. Moreover, families of color, families headed by women, children and the elderly suffer these consequences disproportionately.

There is growing evidence that providing counsel not only makes outcomes more accurate and just, but may actually [help the states save money](#). The right to counsel can also be an [excellent tool for fighting poverty](#). [Judges have also written about why there should be a right to counsel](#).

Unfortunately, most low-income people facing serious civil legal problems in America cannot afford legal representation. The legal aid programs are chronically understaffed and can meet only a small percentage of the need; about 80% of the legal needs go unmet. And while pro bono services from the private bar have grown in recent decades, they cannot begin to fill the void.

Please call your state Representatives and Senator and ask them to support the Right to Counsel.



Mass Union of Public Housing Tenants, Inc.
784 Washington Street, Suite 504
Dorchester, MA 02124
617-825-9750 office massunion.org: webpage

October 15, 2021

Honorable John Keenan
Senate Chair House Chair
Joint Committee on Housing

Honorable James Arciero
House Chair
Joint Committee on Housing

In Support of An Act promoting housing stability and homelessness prevention in Massachusetts, S. 874 (Sen. Sal DiDomenico), H. 1436 (Rep. David Rogers and Rep. Michael Day)

Chair Keenan and Chair Arciero and Members of the Joint Committee on Housing:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify at the Joint Committee on Housing hearing on October 12, 2021. On behalf of the Massachusetts Union of Public Housing Tenants, we urge the Housing Committee to report S.874 and H.1436 An Act promoting housing stability and homelessness prevention in Massachusetts out favorably.

My name is Renee Spencer, and I am a public housing tenant and commissioner in Wellesley and a board member of the Massachusetts Union of Public Housing Tenants (Mass Union). Mass Union members are from all over the state: Boston, Fall River, Quincy, Somerville, Concord, Salem, Norwood, Springfield, Everett, and Worcester, to list a few. Mass Union represents public housing tenants on policy and is instrumental in helping tenants form tenant groups and improve their housing. They help tenants use the law to improve their well-being and housing.

About 10 years ago, I was evicted for non-payment of rent of just \$982. I am a single mother and my son at the time had been away at college. I had been a tenant for 32 years with no problems and had been a leader in my community and a tenant advocate. Despite working two jobs, my son had been away at college, and I had fallen behind on rent.

Then one day on the Friday before July 4th weekend, I came home to find an eviction notice. I will never forget this. The following week, I went into court alone with over \$500 in cash in my pocket to put towards a payment plan with my landlord. I thought that given my long history as a tenant, I would be able to negotiate a payment plan with my landlord. I was wrong.

The housing authority had a lawyer; I didn't. In court, I tried to explain my long history with the housing authority and that for over 30 years I paid my rent and have been a good tenant without any issues. The court urged the housing authority's attorney to negotiate with me given the money I had with me to put towards a payment plan, but my landlord and their attorney refused. I was evicted. After the initial shock wore off, I felt devastated and embarrassed, packed most of my things into my car, and moved in with my sister a couple days later. I was homeless for four years, staying with friends or family. It was embarrassing, and I walked away from advocacy work for a time because of the trauma.

Later though, my eviction empowered me to help other tenants. I am now stably housed and help others who have fallen behind on rent.

In my Mass Union work, I see the difference a lawyer and the right legal resources can make. It feels like when you are by yourself in an eviction, you don't have a chance at all. **Having a lawyer on your side is the difference between staying in your home or being forced to leave without your control. Legal help matters.**

Please report S.874 and H.1436 out favorably. We are grateful for your leadership and look forward to working with you on these bills. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely, /s/ Renee Spencer
Renee Spencer Secretary,
Massachusetts Union of Public Housing Tenants