



Mass Union of Public Housing Tenants, Inc.

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July 5, 2023

Honorable Lydia Edwards
Senate Chair
Joint Committee on Housing

Honorable James Arciero
House Chair
Joint Committee on Housing

RE: Support of S. 857/ H. 1340 *An Act ensuring continued rights for public housing residents*

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

Thank you for the opportunity to testify at the Joint Housing Committee hearing on June 26, 2023. Mass Law Reform Institute and the Mass Union of Public Housing Tenants join together in support of S. 857/ H. 1340 *An Act ensuring continued rights for public housing residents*.

Mass Union is a 50-year-old grassroots organization dedicated to improving the quality of life for tenants in public housing across the state. From cities to towns, from Boston to Fall River to Western Mass and beyond, Mass Union works to ensure that public housing residents and resident groups have a voice and are treated with respect. We believe that meaningful tenant participation holds the power to improve public housing and that residents, like housing authorities and the state, are stewards of this public investment.¹

Mass Law Reform Institute is a legal services advocacy organization that supports and collaborates with legal aid and grassroots organizations across the state on issues that impact low-income people. We have focused on the issues of public housing with Mass Union and legal aid staff for decades, working to institute systemic reforms that have broad impact.

S. 857/ H. 1340 is a needed systemic reform. After years of deferred maintenance and limited capital funding and as more public housing faces redevelopment, S. 857/ H. 1340 would protect both public housing and public housing residents if their homes are transferred to new ownership. These bills evolved in concert with a process that Mass Law Reform and Mass Union initiated with tenants, legal services, housing authorities and other stakeholders to develop a Public Housing Redevelopment Residents' Bill of Rights to articulate principles important to protecting the public's investment in public housing and to capture the lessons and work being

¹ **Our Homes, Our Communities: How Tenants Preserve, Protect and Steward Public Housing**, produced by Mass Union of Public Housing Tenants and the Mass Law Reform Institute (2006) available at: masslegalservices.org/content/our-homes-our-communities-how-tenants-preserve-protect-and-steward-public-housing

done at the local level. **We attach an updated version of the Bill of Rights** that includes new ideas and new policies and documents developed during redevelopment with tenant input.²

S. 857/H. 1340 would accomplish three necessary reforms:

1. Protect the rights of current and future tenants living in redeveloped public housing.
2. Ensure that redevelopment will not decrease the supply of housing for low-income people.
3. Guarantee that tenants have technical assistance to participate in the redevelopment process.

Attached is section-by-section analysis with details about specific provisions.


S. 857/H. 1340 would ensure that public housing - which was built with public dollars - will not be adversely impacted by a change in ownership. They do so by guaranteeing that residents' current rights under federal, state, and local subsidy programs would survive redevelopment and a transfer of the property to a new owner. Such rights include provisions related to rents, grievances, leases, evictions, and tenants participation.


S. 857/H. 1340 would require that redevelopment results in at least the same number of low rent apartments as existed before the project was transferred. No redevelopment in public housing should exacerbate our affordable housing crisis or displace and destabilize tenants that rely on public housing now. Redevelopment should not result in rescreening existing tenants, or reducing their rental assistance, or being used as the basis for eviction. With over 136,000 households on the waiting list for public housing, we cannot afford to lose units.³ The challenge, in fact, is to expand our public housing and to provide more housing for the most vulnerable low-income seniors, people with disabilities and families in our communities.⁴

Finally, S. 857/H. 1340 would ensure that tenants have technical assistance so that they can have meaningful input into the redevelopment process. As Nicole Beckles, a Mass Union Board member and resident in East Boston who has been through the redevelopment of her public housing stated when testifying before the Housing Committee: "Residents live the problem 24/7. We should be empowered and funded to be at the table to provide crucial oversight, especially through redevelopment and beyond."

We thank you for your work to protect public housing and urge the Committee to report favorably S. 857/H. 1340 to ensure that housing created with public dollars is maintained and sustained for current and future low-income residents in our communities.

Sincerely,


Sarah Byrnes
Executive Director, MUPHT


Annette Duke,
Housing Attorney, MLRI

² The Massachusetts Public Housing Redevelopment Residents' Bill of Rights is a living document and updated versions are available at: masslegalservices.org/content/public-housing-development-bill-rights.

³ Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities, June 27, 2023.

⁴ Based on data produced by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, to close the housing gap, Massachusetts needs **175,367 units** of housing affordable to extremely low-income people below 30% of Area Median Income and **190,737 units** for very low-income people at or below 50% of Area Median Income. nlihc.org/gap/state/ma.