

July 13, 2020

Governor Charlie Baker
Massachusetts State House
24 Beacon Street, Room 280
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Governor Baker,

We write to share the priorities and insights of an exciting new collaborative effort, coordinated by several organizations in Lawrence, MA to respond to the extreme needs of Lawrence residents in the economic wake of COVID-19. We recognize that all of our staff, yours included, are flat out working the front lines of this pandemic. We believe that several actions are necessary to avoid further economic, social, and health devastation in our communities.

To this end, **we urgently request that you extend the Eviction Moratorium beyond August, through the course of the pandemic and into recovery.** This is the only way that our families will have a safe place to live while they are recovering mentally, physically, and financially after returning to work. This extension will also give organizations providing rental assistance more time to properly implement and/or expand their programs as new funding becomes available, and to effectively reach individuals and families in need.

At the start of the state of emergency, the dozens of organizations who had come together to such positive effect during the Columbia Gas crisis here – Greater Lawrence Community Action Council, Lawrence CommunityWorks, Groundwork Lawrence, Greater Lawrence Family Health Center, ACT Lawrence, and the Center and Community Development Department of the City of Lawrence among them – reconvened our Nonprofit Working Group to develop a coordinated response to the housing, employment, and health needs of the community during the pandemic: advising city leaders, sharing timely information, identifying gaps that need filling with additional resources, and be partners in designing solutions.

A key part of this larger group has been our Financial and Housing Stability Committee, which has focused on both designing and deploying front-line response such as rental assistance and counseling, and policy advocacy to ensure that the residents we serve have a voice at the table to help direct public, and leverage private, recovery-related resources to where they are most needed.

The deep housing crisis here, where 72% of our population are renters – many doubled and tripled up – and rent prices have jumped 50% in the last two years, has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. Many studies have highlighted the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities of color, and Lawrence is no exception; we currently rank 5th in the Commonwealth with 3,540 confirmed COVID-19 cases. **Collectively our agencies have lists totaling over 2,000 residents in need** of food, help paying the rent, assistance coping with job loss, and access to health

services, safe childcare, and other resources. **Our partners have already collectively raised and distributed over \$600,000 in emergency assistance from many private sources**, but our lists grow longer daily and our neighbors are suffering.

Keeping people safely in their homes is one of the best ways to both stabilize families economically and prevent the illness from spreading. Given that economic recovery will likely greatly lag behind the lifting of emergency restrictions, we strongly believe that the risk of evictions will remain for many months after the moratorium is lifted. The pandemic has also highlighted the severe overcrowding in our city and the lack of safe, affordable, high-quality units for renter families.

For all of these reasons, in addition to our request to extend the eviction moratorium, we also urge you to consider the following priorities:

- 1) Continued aid (such as RAFT and ERMA) to help families – both renters and owner-occupants – remain stably housed and not cause further strain on the shelter and social service systems.
- 2) Significant and increased investment in job-training programs that help Lawrencians and other Gateway city residents to upskill and find new, sustainable employment in the evolving post-COVID economic landscape.
- 3) Increased investment in affordable and safe childcare for working families.
- 4) A doubling down on the state's commitment to support public education and ensure that our children do not lose valuable, irreplaceable learning time this coming year.
- 5) An exploration of progressive revenue strategies to support these investments, which are now necessary for a functioning socioeconomic fabric.

As the scope of need in Lawrence becomes clearer, we pledge to build on our collaborative public/private work to raise and distribute additional private funds and to help design long-term, systemic solutions. We trust you will see our input as an important piece of what needs to happen to bring our city back, and that you will continue to be a strong partner to us in this work.

Thank you for your time and attention. We look forward to your timely response.

ACT Lawrence
Blueskies Behavioral Health Services, Inc.
Bread & Roses, Inc.
City of Lawrence
Community InRoads
Delamano, Inc.
Drug Free Communities Youth in Action
Elevated Thought
Families and Youth Initiative
Family Services of Merrimack Valley
Greater Lawrence Community Action Council
Greater Lawrence Family Health Center
Groundwork Lawrence

Justice Resource Institute
Lawrence Community Works
Lawrence General Hospital
Lawrence Methuen Community Coalition
Lazarus House Ministries
Masshire MVCC
Merrimack River Watershed Council
Merrimack Valley YMCA
MSPCA
Neighbors in Need
United Way of Mass Bay & Merrimack Valley
YWCA Northeastern Massachusetts