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Expansion of Housing Court in Massachusetts Hailed as a Victory by Housing Advocates and Municipalities

Boston, Mass. – A provision in this year’s budget, passed by the Massachusetts legislature and signed by Governor Charlie Baker, included legislative authorization and \$750,000 for the expansion of the housing court to all parts of the Commonwealth. The Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI), in collaboration with the Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission and a diverse coalition of partners, spearheaded the housing court expansion campaign.

“This is a significant victory,” said Annette Duke, an attorney with the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, who worked to advance the housing court expansion. “Many in this state fought for the final statewide expansion of the housing court. Municipal officials, community agencies, members of the bar, and groups that work with elders, people with disabilities, and people facing homelessness. Their voices were heard. We can now say that, finally, everyone in Massachusetts has access to a housing court.”

Prior to the expansion, nearly one-third of the people in Massachusetts lacked access to a housing court, including communities with some of the highest number of rental units, such as Chelsea, Framingham, Malden, Cambridge, Medford, Somerville, Watertown, Woburn, and Waltham. Housing courts handle health and safety code violations, evictions, and other issues related to housing, and also provide residents with access to resources that can prevent homelessness.

Georgia Katsoulomitis, MLRI’s executive director, is a member of the Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission, a commission of judicial, private bar, legal aid, social service, and client representatives created by the Supreme Judicial Court to focus on advancing meaningful access to justice for everyone in the Commonwealth. The Commission endorsed expansion of the Housing Court and partnered with MLRI to move this initiative forward.

“MLRI played a key role in the creation of the Commonwealth’s first housing court in 1972, as well as expansions to other areas of the state,” said Katsoulomitis. “This final expansion is a victory for over 2 million people in the Commonwealth who previously lacked access to this court and its important resources.”

“Not only did attorneys for landlords and tenants advocate for housing court expansion, but cities and towns expressed a need for the code enforcement relief that housing courts

provide,” said Fitchburg attorney James T. Van Buren, also a member of the Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission.

The Housing Court Department is highly effective and efficient, with the lowest cost per case across all Trial Court departments. It has developed the expertise to address the multitude of housing issues, utilizing Housing Specialists, who are required by law to be knowledgeable about the maintenance, repair, and rehabilitation of housing, as well as funds and services available to assist landlords and tenants. Additionally, the Tenancy Preservation Program, which helps tenants with mental health disabilities retain their housing, is only based in housing court. The program is highly successful at working with tenants and landlords to prevent some of the most vulnerable tenants from becoming homeless.

For more information on the expansion of Massachusetts housing court, please visit housingcourt4all.org.

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About the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI)

The Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI) is a statewide nonprofit poverty law and policy center. Its mission is to advance economic, racial and social justice through legal action, policy advocacy, coalition building, and community outreach. MLRI specializes in large-scale legal initiatives and systemic reforms that address the root causes of poverty, remove barriers to opportunity, and create a path to economic stability and mobility for low-income individuals, families and communities.

For more information about MLRI, visit their [website](#).