

“Where did the empathy go?”

Submitted by Material Aid and Advocacy Program board members

In 2020 when COVID-19 ravaged communities across the globe, there was so much to fear - fear of contracting the virus and incurring its often deadly consequences, fear of losing loved ones, fear of the unknown. It's hard to imagine any sort of silver lining, but one that cannot be understated is the ways in which people began to directly serve their neighbors and community. As the limits to the government's approach to COVID-19 became clear, mutual aid efforts sprouted up around the globe to meet the direct needs of community members ranging from food insecurity, safe transportation, vaccine access, childcare, and more. [Massachusetts was no exception](#). In the three years since the pandemic first touched down in the United States, that momentum has dissipated. We are largely back to the old ways where at best many hope the government will intervene to support those fighting to survive the interconnected crisis of homelessness and the war on people who use drugs. And at our worst, others just want the “problems” to get out of our sight with no regard to how it's done and what long term impacts it may have on those deemed a problem. Nowhere in Greater Boston is this more apparent than in the Mass & Cass area.

So much has been said about the unhoused people living on the Ave, and yet very little has been done on a systemic level to address the root causes of their struggle or to meet their daily needs. Beyond the Newmarket area, unhoused people across the state of Massachusetts are being met with closed doors and closed minds. The once fiery passion of our collective empathy towards unhoused community members has now cooled into callousness. [On November 1st, the City of Boston began enacting Mayor Wu's recently passed camping ban - disappearing unhoused community members and disconnecting them from services](#), and further criminalizing unhoused people's survival and thus [exacerbating their homelessness by creating additional barriers to housing and employment](#). [Municipalities across Massachusetts have undermined accessibility in the public realm to deter unhoused people from having a comfortable place to rest](#). To be clear, laws that criminalize homelessness do not solve the underlying causes of homelessness - and only serve to exacerbate it. It isn't only unhoused adults the Commonwealth has turned its back on, [Massachusetts' new Governor has replaced the state's long-standing right-to-shelter law with waitlists just ahead of winter due to the number of migrant families seeking refuge resulting in unhoused families being forced to sleep at Logan Airport and in the conference rooms of state-owned buildings](#).

This near constant barrage of ill-advised policy decisions will lead to more violence, loss of life, trauma, and instability for unhoused people across the region, much of which is preventable.

As board members of the Material Aid and Advocacy Program, one of the remaining low threshold drop-in centers providing direct services to unhoused people in the Greater Boston area, we are witnessing firsthand the impact of these policies on our unhoused community members. Moving people away from services & support, coercing people into substance use disorder treatment, civilly committing people via section 35, and incarcerating people will only increase risk of harm and death. These facts are supported by the lived experience of unhoused people and peer-reviewed evidence. MA Department of Public Health data show that [people who have experienced civil commitment were more likely to die from overdose than those who sought treatment voluntarily](#)¹ and [the opioid-related overdose death rate is 120 times higher for persons released from Massachusetts prisons and jails](#)² than the general population. In a state that prides itself on innovation, justice, and progress, why is this the best we can do? Why have we given up when it comes to supporting unhoused people with dignity and self-determination? Keep the COVID, but let's bring back the days of community members coming together to support each other. Together we can implement solutions to provide pathways to wellness and stability for unhoused people, people who use drugs, and those struggling to survive poverty.

Collective responsibility drives us to support policies that promote the self-determination and dignity of those most impacted, including:

- Developing permanent low threshold housing decoupled from sobriety and shelters
- Implementing overdose prevention centers
- Ending civil commitment and investing in voluntary treatment on-demand
- Decriminalizing homelessness, ending Boston's camping ban, and stopping the sweeps

We have an immense amount of resources and an incredibly low volume of political will. It's up to all of us to advocate for these comprehensive, evidence-based proposals, rather than shirking away from responsibility.

¹ Mass. Dep't of Public Health, Section 35 Commission Treatment Statistics from BSAS Programs at 27, (Feb. 28, 2019), <https://www.mass.gov/doc/presentation-on-dph-opioid-and-civil-commitment-data/download#page=27>.

² Mass. Dep't of Public Health, An Assessment of Fatal and Nonfatal Opioid Overdoses in Massachusetts (2011 – 2015), at 9 (2017), <https://www.mass.gov/doc/legislative-report-chapter-55-opioid-overdose-study-august-2017/download#page=9>.