

GLOBE EDITORIAL

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Rent money

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IT'S ONE of the worst calls to get, says state Representative Carl Sciortino, of pleas for help from constituents who are looking for affordable housing. The Medford Democrat says he can help people struggling with the Registry of Motor Vehicles or with getting MassHealth coverage. But he can't pull an inexpensive apartment out of his hat.

So Sciortino wants to do the next best thing: help people pay their rent.

For years, an effective way to do this was using federal Section 8 vouchers. Tenants paid a portion of their income and the federal subsidy covered the rest.

But federal housing aid has been stagnant, a victim, in part, of tax cuts and spending on the war in Iraq. Massachusetts is a sad example. The state currently has 72,000 federal vouchers. But there is no money for new vouchers, so 49,000 tenants are on a waiting list maintained by the state's Department of Housing and Community Development.

Massachusetts has its own voucher program, but that's no solution: It's also underfunded. In 1997, state vouchers worth \$42 million helped 9,600 households pay the rent. Today the program has only \$26 million for 4,350 vouchers, according to the Citizens' Housing and Planning Association, a local nonprofit organization.

Sciortino and more than 50 other representatives back a bill that would wisely and mercifully add \$10 million to the state's voucher program. This money would stabilize existing vouchers and create 1,200 new ones.

Who would get the help? Working families earning very low salaries, such as child-care workers, home health aides, and medical assistants whose average annual salaries can range from \$20,000 to \$30,000. Workers who earn the minimum wage make only \$14,040. It's all considerably less than the state's median family income of \$74,400 in 2005, according to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. And once families pay the rent, they have little left for other essentials and some are at risk of becoming homeless.

Sadly, some families are already stuck in homeless shelters. Some have the gumption but not the money to leave shelters and rent apartments. The average length of stay for families in shelters is too long -- six months, according to the welfare department.

At first glance, Massachusetts appears to be a wealthy state crowded with colleges and high-tech companies. But the view from ground level reveals families who are struggling to keep up in a housing market that caters to wealthier residents. It's a playing field set at a dizzying tilt that hurts low-wage workers essential to the economy.

The Legislature can and should invest in vouchers and other efforts that give all tenants a fair shot at living in decent housing. ■