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LEGISLATIVE TESTIMONY

To: Joint Committee on Children and Families and Persons with Disabilities

From: James F. Driscoll, Esq., Executive Director

Re: House Bill 135, “An Act providing housing and support services to unaccompanied homeless youth.”

Date: July 16, 2013

The Massachusetts Catholic Conference (“MCC”) respectfully submits this testimony in support of House Bill 135, “An act providing housing and support services to unaccompanied homeless youth.”

Under the proposed legislation, an “unaccompanied homeless youth” is defined as “a person 24 years of age or younger who is not in the physical custody or care of a parent or legal guardian and who lacks a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence.” As defined, unaccompanied homeless youth constitute a highly vulnerable, growing population. Unaccompanied homeless youth are at risk of being involved in, and consequentially harmed by, the commercial sex industry.¹ They are more likely to engage in substance abuse and delinquent behavior, and more likely to drop out of school.²

Because of these and other risks, unaccompanied homeless youth are an especially vulnerable unit of society that are deserving of increased care to aide in a more regular transition back toward a life which includes stable housing and schooling.

The legislation would direct the Executive Office of Health and Human Services to enter into performance-based contracts with organizations and agencies to provide housing and support services to address the specific needs of unaccompanied homeless youth. Programs funded under the act would provide a “continuum of housing options for this population provided on a voluntary basis in conjunction with wraparound support services which shall include but not be limited to: emergency shelter, “kinship” home placements, short term housing and “Transition to Independent Living programs.”³ The goal would be that the funded programs “provide unaccompanied homeless youth with a stable out-of-home placement” and to “help create educational and residential stability.”⁴

In February of 2011, the four Roman Catholic Bishops in Massachusetts issued a statement titled “Standing in Solidarity with All,” in which they pledged to “do all [they] can as Bishops to enable our

¹ Able-Peterson, T., & Meuyleners, M., “Homeless Youth and Sexual Exploitation: Research finding and Practice Implications.” National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2010.

² Bender, k., Ferguson, K., & Thompson, S., “Factors Associated with Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Among Homeless Youth in Three U.S. Cities: The Importance of Transience.” *Journal of traumatic Stress*, 23 (1) 161-68. February, 2010.

³ House Bill 135, 2013-14, page 1.

⁴ *Id.*

institutions – parishes, Catholic Charities, health care facilities and schools – to continue to do their best in extending help to our neighbors in need.”

Currently, administrators of Catholic Charities in the four dioceses in Massachusetts, members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society and other regional leaders and parish member are serving numerous vulnerable residents in Massachusetts, including homeless youth. The passage of House Bill 135 would strengthen and expand the invaluable work already being done by professional and volunteer organizations throughout the Commonwealth.

The Massachusetts Catholic Conference is the public policy office of the Roman Catholic Bishops in the Commonwealth, representing the Archdiocese of Boston and the Dioceses of Fall River, Springfield, and Worcester.