

Religious leaders, community activists call for increased funding to maintain affordable housing stock

By **Daniel Kool** Globe Correspondent, Updated March 3, 2024, 9:08 p.m.



Audience members applauded a speaker during the Housing Justice Action organized by the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization at the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

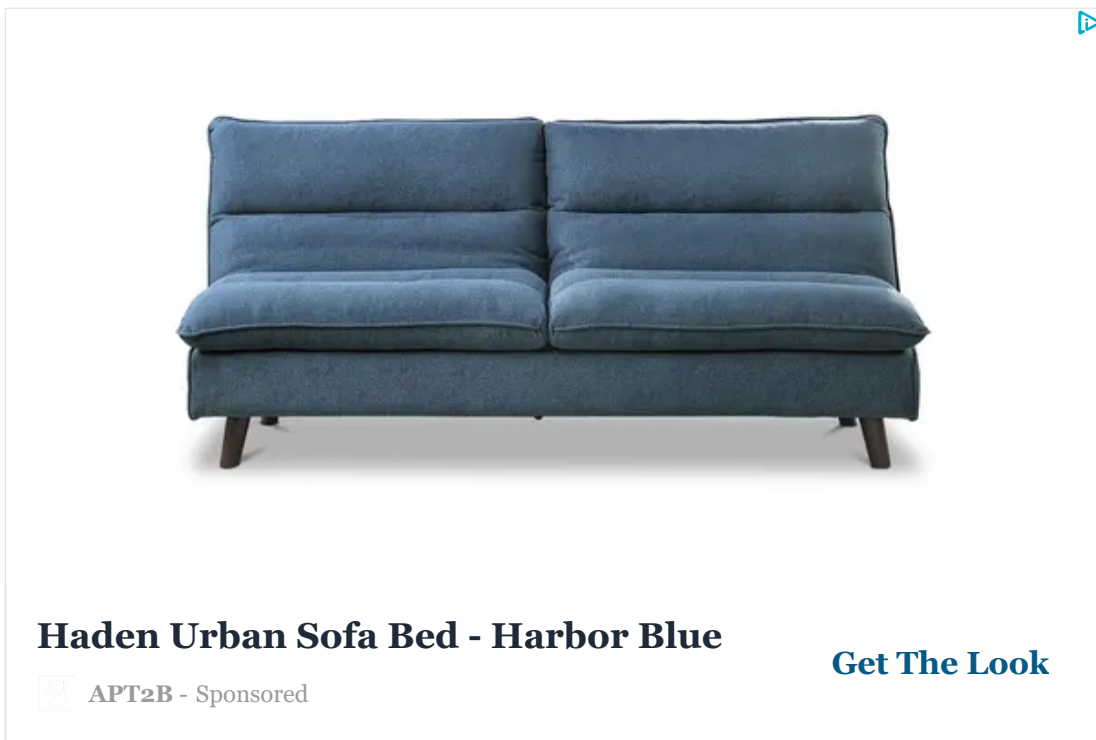
The Greater Boston Interfaith Organization is calling on the Massachusetts Legislature to pass a handful of measures that would expand funding for affordable housing, earmark more than \$1 billion for the maintenance of existing units, and make pursuing a home easier for individuals leaving prison.

The organization's requests were outlined in [an open letter to leaders of the state Legislature](#), which was released Sunday afternoon, as more than 1,700 community members, many of them representing dozens of advocacy organizations from as far as Martha's Vineyard, filled the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center Sunday afternoon to discuss GBIO's requests.

Charlie Homer, co-chair of the event and a leader of the campaign's legislative engagement team, told the Globe before the event began that GBIO has long pushed for the state to expand funding and available resources for affordable housing, but Sunday's action was designed to put new pressure on legislators to pass requests already on the table, including components of Governor Maura Healey's [Affordable Homes Act](#).

"Today is about moving our housing justice campaign closer to the finish line," Homer told the crowd in his opening remarks. "Everyone deserves a home."

Homer said in an interview that he was "really thrilled to see that the governor put forward \$1.6 billion" to maintain public housing in the bond bill, as well as a provision to allow real estate transfer fees to fund affordable housing. Over months of advocacy, Homer said he has heard from tenants who, while thankful to have a place to live at all, deal with crumbling affordable housing units.



“Because of the chronic underfunding, we’re losing units,” Homer said. “And because they’re unlivable, they’re not able to turn units over when people leave.”

The letter is addressed to a half-dozen Democratic state lawmakers, including House Speaker Ron Mariano, Senate President Karen Spilka, and Senator Lydia Edwards, who chairs the [Joint Committee on Housing](#).

Its signatories include more than 150 clergy representing a range of faiths and a broad swath of cities and towns, who argue that the Bible and other holy texts make repeated arguments in favor of securing housing for all, especially society’s most vulnerable.

“And yet, too many of our people live in neglected public housing that endangers their health due to pests, mold, and asbestos,” the clergy wrote in the letter.

In its letter, GBIO outlines five specific requests for the Legislature to complete before the end of its session. They include nearly doubling the public housing operating budget, bringing it from \$107 million to \$189 million; passing at least \$1.6 billion in capital repair funding for public housing, outlined in Healey’s Affordable Homes Act, to

maintain existing developments; and increasing funding for rental certificates for formerly incarcerated people enrolled in case management.

The letter also calls for the state to grant city and town governments the ability to establish local real estate transfer feeds to raise money for affordable housing, and to guarantee identification for individuals coming out of prison, who may otherwise struggle to apply for work or housing assistance.

Leslie Credle, executive director of Justice 4 Housing, which provides support for individuals involved in the justice system, said some people grapple with severed ties to loved ones after spending time in prison, which makes finding housing even more difficult.

“Housing is already a major issue, and we were like last on the totem pole,” Credle said.

Jamal Gooding, executive director of Boston-based People Affecting Community Change, said people released from prison often find themselves without identification, meaning they cannot cash checks or apply for housing.

“I’m asking all 1,700 with you to shout with me very proud to our Senate leaders,” Gooding said, pounding his fist on the podium. “Enough is enough.”

Some attendees signed pledge cards, vowing to call their representatives Monday morning and join an in-person lobbying day at the State House on April 17.

Among them was Michele Frazier, a 63-year-old who lives in public housing in Wellesley, who said the attendance at Sunday’s event gave her hope for the future of Healey’s bill and, with it, her own housing situation.

“Seeing all this is a positive image,” Frazier said, after chanting with fellow attendees that housing is a fundamental right. “Everything looks like it’s going up.”

State Senator Liz Miranda and Representatives Rob Consalvo of Boston and Mike Connolly of Cambridge — all Democrats — told the crowd that housing remains an urgent need across the state, and they praised Healey’s bond bill and its focus on affordability.

Consalvo said there is “no more important issue in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts,” drawing cheers and applause from the crowd.

Phil Hillman, leader of St. Paul AME Church in Cambridge and an organizer with GBIO’s strategy team, said in an interview that the legislators’ support was extremely valuable, but he argued that change requires support from House and Senate leadership.

“We do have legislators here. They’re a part of it,” Hillman said. The key question, he argued, is: “Who’s missing?”

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