



Poor People's United Fund

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Boston's Spare Change Community

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Wear a mask. Remove a mask. Get a shot. Get another shot. Repeat. Fatigue set in a long time ago. But we do what we need to do in hopes that things will get better. The Advent season came at a good time. It is a season of waiting and hoping that darkness will give way to light.

Today, there's a darkness that surrounds women and men at Mass And Cass. Darkness that trying to close with MA leaders pushing to build a women's prison. And a darkness that lives in the hearts and minds of some MA legislators who can't find a way to give a small increase to poor people facing the same cost of living increases that much of the nation faces.

But there are people among us who align themselves with our brothers and sisters in crisis. They shed some light on what is happening so we can get involved in a designing solutions. Jim Stewart, a stalwart advocate for homeless people, Vicky Steinitz, educator and advocate for justice on a wide range of issues, and Georgia who continues to be a voice for people living in poverty. In this newsletter, they offer insights and information on situations that desperately need our attention.

Yes. People are dying of Covid. But let's not forget that there are also people withering away from a lack of attention. HUD reported that 18,471 homeless people in MA in 2019. I read recently that more than 350 beds in psychiatric facilities have been eliminated amid staffing shortages in the state's behavioral health system. While more people need mental health care hospitals don't have enough beds to treat them.

But the lights on trees in cities and towns; the candles in the windows give us HOPE and help remind us that the sun is coming. Things can get better. There are compassionate people working every day to bring some light and healing to people who need it. In Kippy's words....

"We look at each other and know the pain, the hurt, the love and the hope we share...on nights we have spent together at Christmas Eve; knowing inevitably that a child was born who grew into the man we try to follow in our stumbling way. Out of passion for justice, our demand for fairness, our need for each other, we band together to pray, to hope and to dream of a brighter tomorrow when dawn brings us a savior whose simple message is "Love one another."

Thank you for supporting PPUF. **Merry Christmas.** Fran, Georgia, and Margaret.



photo by Ellen Shub

THOUGHTS on MASS and CASS

Jim Stewart

The “Mass and Cass” (intersection of Mass Ave & Melnea Cass Blvd) situation didn’t just happen. It is the predictable outcome of a punitive, stigma-based policy which defines certain drugs as illicit and then hunts and incarcerates those involved in their use.

This use of punishing state power has always been a defining feature of drug policy, and it is as racist as it is futile.

Perhaps most frustrating is that concrete alternatives exist. During the ongoing public Health Emergency, local and state officials proved it was possible to secure and make available non congregate shelter options so poor and unhoused people could have safe and dignified alternatives to over crowded, warehouse like shelters.

We need to see a similar approach brought to this situation.

“Mass and Cass” has also been associated with the pandemic exacerbated overdose crisis that continues to ravage those of our siblings struggling with substance use disorder.



In Massachusetts overdose deaths, after a modest dip, are once again at record levels. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health reported, in the first nine months of 2021, there were 1,613 opioid related overdose deaths, approximately 21 more than in the first nine months of 2020. Nationally, Last year alone, over 100,000 of our siblings succumbed to drug overdose.

With regard to this challenge, there is an alternative to criminalizing or blaming the victim. Safe Consumption Services (SCS) are a well trod path towards harm reduction, bringing immediate relief and community improvement. They have been proven internationally and without exception to save lives, to reduce injection-related infections such as HIV and Hepatitis, and to reduce drug-related crime and abandoned syringes.

SCS can provide an ongoing link to a critical array of treatment and social services. Indeed, studies have shown that those making use of SCS are 30-35% more likely to engage in treatment and other forms of self care and assistance, while dispelling unfounded fears of the “honey pot” effect.

They work because they provide a bedrock of non-judgmental support in a non-coercive setting. Local police often refer people to SCS—they don’t drag them into it.

However much officials like Suffolk County Sheriff Tompkins’s involuntary treatment approach are dressed up by the softening language of a grant proposal, the last time Boston attempted forced “treatment,” there were 4 documented unnecessary deaths. Treatment must be voluntary.

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Supermarket Gift Cards

Here are two examples of organizations that receive a share of 2400 gift cards PPUF distributes each year

Tree of Life

My name is Carol Miranda. I have been meaning to send PPUF an email for a very long time, however, every-time I say I will sit and prepare an email, I get caught up. Tree of Life/Jamaica Plain Community Connections was super busy all year round, in fact, we never closed our doors to the community throughout the most difficult times of the pandemic.

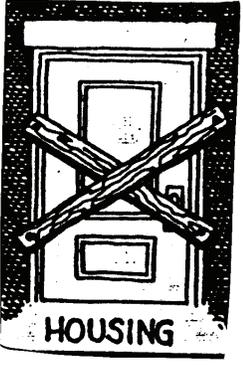
I have received on numerous occasions gift cards from Georgia and can't thank PPUF enough for this generous support. The gift cards have been distributed evenly between our Father's support groups, Mother's support groups, grandparents raising their grandchildren and other families in need in the community, including being raffled at the annual Unity Day.



The families are grateful for anything that is provided to them and it has surely been of great help to be able to provide additional support that you have been able to donate. I am sending some pictures of the groups that have benefited from the gift cards. Once again, thank you for all of your generous support for our JP families.

Justice 4 Housing is a grassroots organization committed to ending housing discrimination and homelessness for justice involved individuals impacted by domestic violence and incarceration.

The problem is very real for people trying to find housing after being released from jail. **Sixty percent** of women and men returning home after incarceration are homeless. There are no other organizations like Justice4Housing. When the founder, Leslie Credle, told people about her vision to challenge Public Housing Authorities to change their discriminatory policies and create permanent housing opportunities for those with criminal records, she was told this was an impossible goal.



But after working hard to build a strong organization, public opinion is beginning to shift. Justice4Housing has developed relationships with legislators who support their work such a Sen. Chang-Diaz and Rep. Miranda. Justice4Housing has filed bills that will help remove barriers to housing for formerly incarcerated people. The number of their allies keeps growing as people realize that housing is the foundation for future success- for **everyone**. PPUF is proud to play a small part in the vital efforts of Justice4Housing.



Safe Consumption Services, physically and legally outside the “Corrections Department, are a critical part of any plan to bring hope and stability to people in and around Mass and Cass.

To make Safe Consumption available, people of conscience should urgently communicate to their state Representatives and Senators that you support legislation legalizing it currently being considered (H2088 S1272) in both the Massachusetts House and Senate.

There are ways to bring change to “Mass and Cass.” Offering hope and positive alternatives, like those Poor Peoples United Fund has generously supported and advocated for, should be what all people are committed to in order to bring good news to those who are persecuted

and marginalized. We should also be demanding that their elected representatives lend their support as well.

Lift of Kids Report

Georgia Mattison

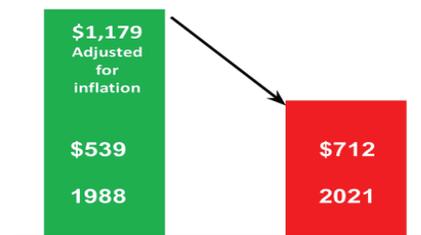
The Lift Our Kids Coalition sponsored two amendments in Massachusetts House this past session with lead sponsor Marjorie Decker.

Amendment 756 was a deep poverty grant increase of 10%. Amendment 782 was a one time extra payment for the lowest income households. The House campaign was not successful with both amendments failing.

The Coalition is now moving on to work with the Senate to pass both these amendments.

The Lift Our Kids Coalition is now planning to have all members meet with individual legislators to discuss the need for welfare grant increases.

Grants Still Far Below 1988 Value



Source: Mass. Law Reform Inst.

www.liftourkidsma.org

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MA Women's Prison Moratorium Campaign

Vicky Steinitz -- November, 2021

Last July 4th, forty members of FREE HER, the National Campaign Ending Incarceration of Women and Girls, traveled from Boston to Swampscott to picnic on Governor Baker's front lawn. Outraged by the state contract awarded to HDR Architecture a month earlier for the study and design of a new women's prison at Framingham, they decided it was time for dramatic action. They called for passage of legislation which would impose a five year moratorium on new construction and demanded clemency or shortened sentences for long term prisoners at Framingham. They unfurled a Clemency Quilt to illustrate the stories of older women prisoners. To date, Gov. Baker has not granted a single petition for clemency during his two terms in office nor has he been willing to meet with opponents of the proposed prison.

Families for Justice as Healing the Boston chapter of the national campaign, argues for redirecting the 50 million dollars earmarked for the new prison and instead using this money to create community-based prevention and reentry initiatives. As formerly incarcerated women and family members, they know the pain and destruction incarceration causes and proclaim "Nothing About Us Without Us." (justiceashealing.org). The Framingham prison population has been declining and now averages 193 women per day at an annual cost of \$162,260 per person. The prison, built almost 150 years ago, is in shocking disrepair and FJAH agrees it should be closed, but they are convinced that using the construction money to address poverty, violence and other systemic issues in underfunded communities, could prevent imprisonment altogether. According to Worth Rises, an organization tracking corporations that profit from incarceration, HDR Architecture has designed more than 275 correctional facilities across the nation. HDR has refused to meet with Families for Justice as Healing and allegedly has been spying on activists opposed to the construction.

The July picnic was followed in September by a week long, 90 mile walk from Springfield to Boston, to educate people about the moratorium bills. At a hearing for the Senate bill, 70 people testified in support of the bill, and no one spoke in opposition. However, this does not mean that there will be smooth sailing for this legislation. In addition to the governor, the Mass Sheriffs Association supports the new prison and HDR is moving forward. (Also see Unlock Them Up, an excellent article on the campaign in the Oct./Nov 2021. issue of The Progressive.)

Among other current prison reform efforts are legislation calling for no cost prison phone calls as well as an ACLU court case against Bristol County Sheriff Thomas Hodgson for the fees he charged inmates in his facilities. Almost all MA sheriffs have contracts with Securus, the private company that monopolizes prison phone services. Until 2018, Securus was charging Bristol County inmates \$3.16 for the first minute of a call. Between 2011 and 2013, Hodgson collected more than \$1 million dollars in commissions from Securus! Now, after years of struggle, most state prison contracts set rates at 14 cents a minute but that still is a major financial burden for families. Last summer, Connecticut passed the first in the nation legislation to make all inmate calls free and Mass activists are hoping to follow in CT's footsteps.

Please call Senate President Karen Spilka (617) 722-1500 and House Speaker Ronald Mariano (617) 722-2500 urging them to support H-1905/S-2030, the prison moratorium bill.



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HOPE

