

# How to be a Housing Advocate

For decades, Massachusetts cities and towns have failed to build enough housing for our growing population. **This collective inaction has led to the current shortage of homes** that keeps costs unnecessarily high across the Commonwealth.

For far too long, many of the people who participated in our political and civic systems were opposed to most (if not all) new housing. Today, however, there is growing awareness that providing stable and affordable housing is vital in our efforts to address some of society's most pressing challenges. More and more people across the state are activating and joining the pro-housing movement. Increasing housing production will reduce the high cost of housing, support broad economic growth, address the climate crisis, and can open new avenues of equitable access to opportunity.

**The best way to make these changes and address our housing crisis is for more people to speak up and proactively advocate for change with their state and local policymakers.** Below are a few steps you can take to get involved:



## **1 Learn About the Issues, Broadly & Locally**

*The more you learn, the more you'll be able to back up your advocacy.*

- Follow trusted housing organizations on social media and check in to see what they're posting about.
- Explore books, articles, videos, and reports on housing policies and how they affect all of us.
  - *Looking for somewhere to start? [Click here.](#)*
- Deepen your understanding of your local situation.
  - Check your municipal website for a Housing Production Plan or any other housing plans or reports.
  - Look for resources from local and regional organizations that provide housing data for your community.



## 2 Know Your State & Local Elected Officials

*You probably know who your Congressperson is, but do you know who represents you at the state and local level?*

- Most housing policy decisions are made at the state and local level:
  - Find your State Representative and State Senator [here](#).
  - Your city or town website should have a list, usually with contact information, for your local elected officials (City or Town Council, Select Board, etc).
  - If you have difficulty figuring out who represents you, call your town administrator and ask!
- Check your elected officials' websites and/or social media accounts to see if they have any existing public positions on housing policy or specific projects.
- Sign up for any mailing lists to stay up-to-date on events and opportunities to engage.



## 3 Establish & Develop Relationships

*You don't need to wait for a specific piece of legislation to reach out and start a conversation!*

- While advocating for specific legislation is important, it's equally important and helpful to establish a relationship with your elected officials and/or their staff.
- Check your elected officials' websites for upcoming events or "office hours" where you can introduce yourself.
- If you don't see existing opportunities, reach out and ask for a meeting - let them know that you care about housing and why! (see "[Tips for Meeting With Your Elected Officials](#)")
- Know that you might meet with your elected official's staff, and that's okay.
  - Staff often serve as issue experts, and are key to getting information to their boss.



## 4 Understand Your Opportunities to Engage

*Know the points in the public process where you can most effectively weigh in and make your voice heard.*

- For **statewide housing legislation**, including allocation of state funds, granting home rule authority, or establishing statewide baseline zoning code requirements:
  - Reach out to your State Representative and Senator to express your support or opposition to a specific bill
  - Submit written testimony and/or testify in-person at a committee hearing on a specific bill
- For housing issues being considered by your **city or town**, including municipal budget allocations, capital expenditures, or local zoning changes:
  - If your municipality is governed by a Town Meeting structure, check your municipal website for more information on when and how to attend and participate in Town Meeting.
  - If you have a City or Town Council or Select Board, reach out to your Councilor or Selectperson to express your support or opposition to specific proposed ordinances. You may also submit written testimony and/or testify at a committee hearing.
- For **individual housing proposals** and changes to your local zoning code:
  - Show up to a community meeting to support individual new housing developments.
  - Submit written testimony and/or testify in-person at your local planning board, zoning commission, or zoning board of appeal meeting.
  - Check your municipal website and sign up for email lists to be notified of when these meetings are scheduled and what is on the agenda.



## 5

### Hone Your Message

*A concise and compelling message can help amplify your impact.*

- Testifying at hearings shows legislators there is public support for, or opposition to, a specific piece of legislation, and can influence how they choose to engage on the issue.
- Testimony can be submitted ahead of time in writing and/or spoken at a hearing. Be sure to check if and what the rules are, especially if you need to sign up in advance.
- Plan your message! Thinking through your testimony in advance allows you to use your time effectively. (*Need help getting started? See "[Preparing Your Testimony](#)"*)
- Remember that oral testimony is usually limited to 2 minutes; even if you're submitting written testimony, it's better to be short and to the point for a higher chance that it will be read.



## 6

### Join or Build a Coalition

*While individual advocacy is always helpful, there is great power in numbers.*

- Check to see if a pro-housing organization already exists in your city or town and reach out
  - Attend the group's meetings to meet other people in your community who care about housing and see how you can support existing campaigns and initiatives
- If a local group doesn't exist, reach out to organizations that can help support your coalition-building efforts: [Citizens' Housing & Planning Association \(CHAPA\)](#), [Housing Forward-MA](#), [Abundant Housing Massachusetts](#)
- Talk to your neighbors! While advocating with your legislators is important, starting with your friends and family makes a big difference too!