

October 14, 2025

West Roxbury Civic Improvement Association (WRCIA)

Attn: President Martin Keogh

West Roxbury, MA 02132

Subject: Request for Support for ZBA Appeal Regarding 5 Redlands Road

Dear Members of the WRCIA,

My name is Stephen Marsh. I am a direct abutter to 5 Redlands Road. I want to thank Martin Keogh and the WRCIA for the opportunity to speak tonight on behalf of my family and many others in our community.

On September 15, ISD issued a change-of-use permit allowing a large homeless shelter to open at 5 Redlands Road. The permit was issued "as-of-right," meaning it is treated as an allowed use for this Neighborhood Shopping district. This was a shocking decision. The shelter would clearly have a major impact on this neighborhood and should require zoning relief. As an abutter, I have appealed that decision, and a hearing is scheduled with the ZBA for October 28. Tonight, we are asking all of you to support this appeal.

We do not oppose this project because we want to deny anyone a home. My wife and I chose to live in this neighborhood because we value compassion and inclusion. We want our children to grow up seeing that everyone has different needs. Most importantly, we want them to see those needs treated with dignity and care.

A great example of this care can be found right across our street. A group home there serves a small number of people with different disabilities. They receive services and transportation and are well cared for by the staff. It's a wonderful part of our neighborhood. I'm grateful my kids can see that inclusion and kindness in action every day. I'm proud to live next to a place like that, and if this shelter truly helped families, I would be proud of it too.

But this project isn't that.

It is a rushed plan that would expose families to terrible conditions. There are no bedrooms, only small hospital-style rooms without private bathrooms. Two showers would be shared by everyone on the floor. There is a single kitchen in the basement. Most concerning, it would

operate under the State's Emergency Assistance (EA) Family Shelter system, a program that has faced heavy criticism, and for good reason.

A recent report documented over 1,000 serious incidents in these shelters, assaults, overdoses, domestic violence, and more. Just last Friday, a man was sentenced for raping a 15-year-old girl in a family shelter in Rockland. In Revere, police arrested a resident with ten pounds of fentanyl and an assault rifle in his room. At another site, officers found a gun, nine bullets, 900 pills, and 30 grams of cocaine in one family's room.

These are not isolated cases. There are repeated reports of overdoses, violence, sexual assault, and even human trafficking. At a family shelter in Peabody, a 36-year-old mother begged to be moved, saying she couldn't sleep at night because of the 24-hour drinking, drug use, and fighting. She said: *"I don't feel calm, I don't feel safe, I can't live like this."*

All of these incidents happened under the exact same program proposed for Redlands Road. Many shelters in that program were run by the same operator, Making Opportunity Count (MOC). MOC ran nearly a dozen hotel-based shelters across the state, all of which were shut down this summer because of serious safety issues, with Governor Healey declaring they are *"no place to raise a family."* This project follows that same model.

In another incident, a mother attempted suicide in her room and shelter workers tried to remove her children from custody. Other families in the shelter were upset by this and chased two employees out an emergency exit to their car, trapped them inside, and banged on their windows. Police were called and the crowd eventually dispersed. That incident happened at a family shelter run by MOC.

At a meeting in July, Colby O'Brien from MOC was asked whether there had been incidents at any of their shelters. His answer was simply, *"no complaints."* We now know that wasn't true. Since then, a resident of our street filed a public records request, and HLC's attorney confirmed there were over 150 serious incidents reported at MOC-run shelters in the past year alone. So it is not the case that MOC is somehow the only operator in the state to have no issues. He simply misrepresented that to everyone.

MOC and the property developer have misrepresented a lot of things. They say whatever they need to say to get what they want. The truth is that what they are proposing would not be a safe haven for families; it would be a crisis zone.

A former family-shelter director said it plainly: *“Ninety-eight percent of people I worked with were really good people. That other two percent was responsible for a lot of crime: multiple rapes, sex trafficking, drugs, domestic violence, guns.”*

It would be naïve to expect otherwise in facilities like this. It's not the families' fault. You're putting hundreds of people in cramped, stressful conditions, at the most chaotic moment of their lives. Many have mental-health, substance-use, or trauma needs, without proper support or security. That's why so much care needs to be taken when opening a facility like this. You must carefully pick the location, assess the impact, and select a site that can accommodate it safely. In this case, no care has been taken. This project is being rushed through, without public input.

For a long time, my wife and I didn't know if we would ever be able to afford a home in Boston. We put everything we had into it, and in return, that investment has given us a place to raise our two children and build a family. All of that is now at risk because of this proposal.

We all want to see families have homes. I cannot begin to understand the hardship of not having a stable home for your family; I only know what having one has meant for mine. This fight is not about denying help to families, it is about ensuring they get real solutions that are safe. If this project were actually good for this community, it wouldn't need to be pushed through with secrecy and misrepresentations. It doesn't help those families. It fails them, and it fails all of us if we allow it to move forward without review.

I can't explain what happened at ISD to let this permit be issued. I'll just say this: sometimes the City gets it wrong. That is what the appeals process is for. Zoning review is the only way to bring this plan out into the open and allow the public to understand and comment on it. Don't we deserve at least that?

Thank you for your consideration and for your service to the West Roxbury community. I respectfully ask the WRCIA to support our appeal before the ZBA on October 28.

Sincerely,

Stephen Marsh

On behalf of the Redlands–Manthorne Neighborhood Alliance
Redlands Road,
West Roxbury, MA 02132