



UMASS DONAHUE INSTITUTE



## Getting to Work:

### An Integrated Approach to Workforce Achievement for Western Massachusetts Homeless Families

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Prepared for the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness and United Way of Pioneer Valley

Funded by the Paul & Phyllis Fireman Foundation

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In addition, we thank everyone who attended the three Western Massachusetts listening sessions, and the homeless parents who participated in our focus groups for sharing their experiences.

## Letter from Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness

Dear Network Community:

We are pleased to bring you this report on the challenges and possible solutions to better serve homeless families in Western Massachusetts. We understand that the best possible support is that which allows families to build capacity to sustain their housing and their family's well-being. That capacity depends on education and income. This report lays out a plan to make both more possible.

We are indebted to the Paul and Phyllis Fireman Foundation for their vision in making this project possible. And we are incredibly fortunate to have the UMass Donahue Institute in our own backyard, at the ready to tackle this project with the level of rigor and commitment that is a hallmark of their efforts. Specifically, we give heartfelt thanks to the project's leaders, Lindsay Koshgarian and Carrie Bernstein, who took countless hours of conversation, research and strategic thinking to deliver us a blueprint that will serve us for years to come.

So now we're at a new starting gate. We have the facts and figures; we have evidence of best practices; and we have in-depth input from dozens of stakeholders from every county in the region. We have a plan. And with the stakes so very high, that plan requires us to act now.

Our success in implementing this plan will depend upon the continued investment of all those who made it possible. Based upon our Network's track record, we are filled with both confidence and excitement at what we can make happen together. Thank you to every single Network partner who makes us what we are, and for doing what you do. Your commitment inspires, and your hard work gives families the chance to live in a home they can call their own. By turning this plan into action, we can offer families a better shot at staying there. Onward we go.

Father Stan Aksamit, Co-Chair

Lynne Wallace, Co-Chair

Pamela Schwartz, Director  
Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness

## Executive Summary

*"Infrequent, random acts of intervention will not achieve the results we seek."*

-- Participant at The Pathways Mapping Initiative's Mental Mapping Meeting on school readiness

*"You have three jobs: you have school, you work and you're a mom."* -- Western Massachusetts homeless parent

Over recent years, policy makers and service providers have increasingly recognized the value of a housing first approach to homelessness. Built on solid evidence, this approach has been found to be both cost-effective, and to provide the necessary foundation for all other services. Programs that attempt to implement a housing first strategy rightly recognize that without stable long-term housing, homeless people are tremendously challenged to improve their lives through employment, counseling, or other services. Children who experience homelessness are particularly vulnerable, and often experience greater academic and emotional disturbances. Housing first as a strategy to solve homelessness has rightly become a focus for government and service providers alike.

At the same time, there is increasing recognition that the inadequate supply of subsidized or otherwise affordable housing places a great deal of importance on helping homeless families, and families at risk of homelessness, make strides toward economic self-sufficiency. The challenges faced by homeless families in earning a self-sufficiency wage are complex and interrelated: lack of education and work experience, limited English proficiency, difficulty affording and accessing child care and transportation, and a corresponding lack of jobs that offer sufficient wages, benefits and hours to fully support their families, among many others.

Through a grant from the Fireman Foundation, the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness has asked the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute to assess the needs of homeless and at-risk families in the four Western Massachusetts counties and develop an action plan to assist them with the transition to work and make strides toward self-sufficiency.<sup>1</sup> The development of the action plan has been guided by a Steering Committee representing a diverse group of advocacy, shelter and workforce organizations and experts. Over a four-month process, the project team has identified a set of promising approaches and recommendations and solicited input from a wide swath of community groups, service providers, and homeless customers themselves.

In addition to a review of promising programs and evidence-based strategies from around the nation, the development of the action plan has relied on the experiences of service providers and customers. These experiences were solicited through a series of three regional listening sessions for service providers and community stakeholders; two customer focus groups; and a series of individual interviews with front-line workers and program managers.

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<sup>1</sup> Similar grants were also provided to other regional networks to end homelessness throughout the state; their action plans will be available through the Fireman Foundation.

This action plan has been developed with the belief that given motivation, time, and individualized, appropriate assistance, homeless families can make significant strides toward self-sufficiency. In keeping with the Fireman Foundation's stated intentions for the action plan, the action steps are intended to rely on both evidence-based and promising "innovative" program models, and to make efficient use of available resources and capacities. There is a wealth of knowledge about what works, both from the literature and the experience of service providers in Western Massachusetts. The tremendous challenge is sustaining the resources and the will to make these things a reality in an atmosphere of limited funding, in a diverse and geographically large community.

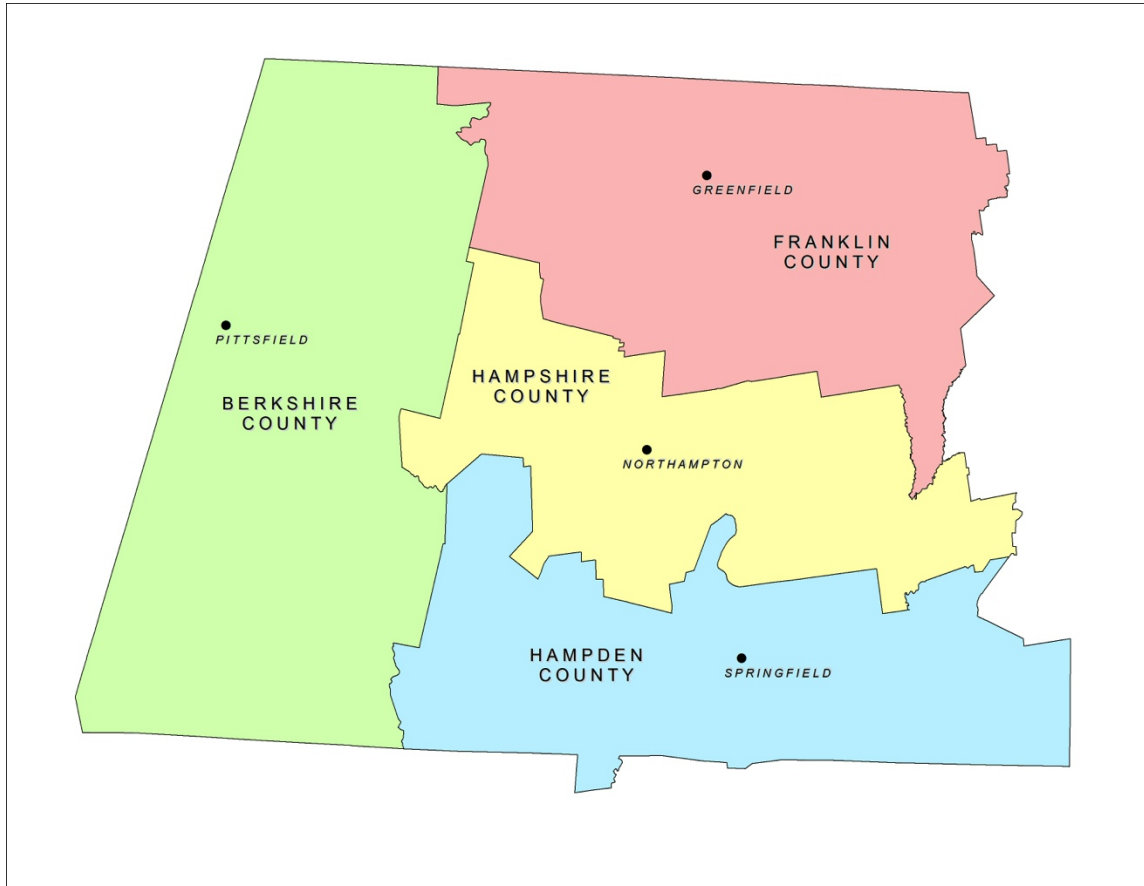
Recommendations are for the development of a pilot program to serve a limited number of families through four major program components:

1. Establish an employment specialist position: Homeless families' multiple barriers to employment mean that a successful intervention must combine assistance across multiple service providers and government programs, and a familiarity with the unique challenges posed by homelessness itself. Based on successes in programs serving welfare-to-work, disabled and similar populations in Western Massachusetts and around the nation, this program component meets a need for individualized assistance targeted toward employment for homeless families. The employment specialist would play a variety of essential functions: provide a trusted source of support to homeless families before and after employment; assess individual customers' needs and goals; develop and provide direct connections and support to employers; and go beyond referrals to act as service coordinator across multiple service agencies.
2. Increase coordination among service agencies: Workforce providers have experience providing job search and training resources and relationships with employers, but often do not have experience or the ability to serve populations with multiple barriers to employment. Shelter providers have a deep understanding of the multiple barriers to work that homeless families face, but typically do not have employment specialists on staff. Team meetings across multiple service providers would provide caseworkers across systems an opportunity to address customer's individual barriers and streamline services. High-level meetings among program executives would provide the opportunity to review programmatic needs and limitations and make changes when possible.
3. Develop opportunities for employment: Traditional employment services such as those often found at Career Centers, and supported employment models rely heavily on relationships with employers to both secure and sustain employment. While maintaining relationships with employers would fall under the responsibilities of the employment specialist, providers can also play a role by providing work opportunities within their own organizations and leveraging existing community and business relationships to look for additional avenues for employment.
4. Implement a volunteer-based program to assist with job search and related service access: Inspired by the LIFT program that operates in Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, New York and Washington, DC, this program component would support the work of the employment specialist and other case workers across all relevant service agencies with student volunteers trained to work one-on-one with customers to conduct housing and job search activities, apply for public benefits and tax credits, and obtain referrals for related services such as legal assistance and health care.

Finally, this process has crystallized two related and inseparable needs: the need for additional funding for quality programs and support services, and the need for advocacy to revise existing program elements that have proven to present problematic incentives for customers and service providers alike.

## Housing, Homelessness and the Western Massachusetts Economy

### Overview of Region



Source: MassGIS

Western Massachusetts is defined as Berkshire, Franklin, Hampshire and Hampden counties. This four-county region with a population of 814,967 as of the 2010 Census accounts for a geographically large and demographically diverse segment of the state, encompassing both major cities and rural swaths. Defined by the Pioneer Valley and Connecticut River in the east and the Berkshire mountain range in the west, the region encompasses old industrial cities of Springfield, Holyoke, and Pittsfield; a significant portion of the state's agriculture; educational institutions; and tourism. The Springfield metropolitan area is home to most of the region's residents, with a population of 697,458, and consists of Franklin, Hampshire and Hampden counties.

The region encompasses three of eleven "gateway cities," or older industrial cities with "unrealized potential," in the Commonwealth identified by MassINC. Concentrated poverty and low educational attainment in these cities present challenges for families and service providers alike.



Springfield and Holyoke have family poverty rates – at 22 percent and 26.2 percent, respectively, significantly higher than the state average (7.5 percent), or the city of Boston (15.1 percent). These cities also have higher portions of the adult population with extremely low educational attainment, with adults with less than a high school degree at 23.8 percent in Springfield and 27.0 percent in Holyoke, compared to only 15.5 percent in Boston and 11.1 percent statewide. These cities have higher percentages of families headed by single female householders, at 25.8 percent in Springfield and 24.2 percent in Holyoke, compared to 15.8 percent in Boston and 12.3 percent statewide. Holyoke is also home to a larger percentage of non-native English speakers, with 45.8 percent of people age 5 or older speaking a language other than English at home. Additionally, Holyoke and Springfield have also had the first and second highest rates of teen pregnancy in the state, respectively, and have received a five-year, \$5.5 million grant to reduce teen pregnancy rates.<sup>2</sup>

The city of Pittsfield has a higher percentage of families with single female householders than the state average, at 14.7 percent, and though the percentage of adults with less than a high school degree is similar to the state average, the percentage of adults with only a high school degree (no college) is much higher than the state, at 35 percent. Table 1 shows selected social and economic characteristics for these three cities.

Table 1. Selected Social and Economic Characteristics of Western Massachusetts Cities

	Springfield	Holyoke	Greenfield	Pittsfield	Boston	Massachusetts
Population	153,060	39,880	17,456	44,737	617,594	6,547,629
Poverty (families)	22.0%	26.2%	11.6%	11.7%	15.1%	7.5%
Single Female Householder (families)	25.8%	24.2%	15.2%	14.7%	15.8%	12.3%
Language other than English at home	35.4%	45.8%		8.1%	35.5%	21.5%
Public assistance (cash)	8.0%	7.7%	4.8%	6.6%	4.1%	2.9%
Free or reduced price lunch (school district)	85.6%	83.3%	43.8%	55.2%	69.5%	35.2%
Education (ages 25 and over)						
Less than 9th grade	10.7%	12.4%	2.6%	2.1%	8.1%	4.9%
9th-12th grade, no diploma	13.1%	14.6%	5.9%	7.3%	7.4%	6.2%
High School Diploma or Equivalency	33.4%	27.5%	35.2%	35.0%	22.7%	26.2%

Sources: 2010 Census; 2010 3-year American Community Survey; 2010 5-year American Community Survey; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2011-2012 data.

## Housing in Western Massachusetts

While housing in Western Massachusetts is relatively affordable compared to the rest of the state, previous analysis by the UMass Donahue Institute has shown that correspondingly lower wages in the region often mean that “severe” housing burden, as measured by the percent of the population paying more than 50 percent of income for housing, remains a problem in Western Massachusetts despite the region’s lower housing costs.<sup>3</sup> According to American Community Survey 2010 data, the percent of

<sup>2</sup> Peter Goonan. “Planning to combat teen pregnancy in Springfield and Holyoke pleases director of Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy.” [http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2011/10/planning\\_to\\_combat\\_teen\\_pregna.html](http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2011/10/planning_to_combat_teen_pregna.html). Accessed March 13, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> UMDI. “State of the Massachusetts Housing Market.: 2008. [www.massbenchmarks.org](http://www.massbenchmarks.org).

renters paying more than 30 percent of income for housing was 59.1 percent in Springfield, 57.9 percent in Holyoke, and 52.3 percent in Pittsfield.<sup>4</sup>

With tenants stretched thin to make rent, public housing and Section 8 vouchers are in short supply, and wait lists for either are often years long. With notable exceptions such as Springfield and Holyoke, the majority of Western Massachusetts cities and towns, as in the rest of the state, do not meet the state's standard for 10 percent affordable housing units as provided under the state's affordable housing law. A regional analysis of subsidized housing stock conducted by UMDI in 2008 showed that the available subsidized units were adequate to serve only 37 percent of low-income households in the Berkshires, and 48 percent of low income households in the Pioneer Valley (where low-income households were defined as those earning less than 80 percent of Area Median Income, or AMI). The study also found that when all affordable rental units – not just subsidized units – were considered, the Pioneer Valley as a whole would need an additional 7,000 affordable rental units to have enough affordable housing for all renters categorized as Extremely Low (ELI) according to HUD standards for their area.<sup>5</sup>

Foreclosures have also hit the region hard, as elsewhere, contributing to homelessness to some extent when foreclosed owners are unable to find housing, but more often when renters are forced out of a foreclosed property. According to Massachusetts Housing Partnership's Foreclosure Monitor, the city of Springfield is fifth in the state for distressed housing units (those where a foreclosure petition has been filed, an auction scheduled, or are bank-owned) per 1000 units, with 1,459 distressed units as of October 2011.<sup>6</sup> A general lack of affordable housing for low-income people and the foreclosure crisis, combined with high unemployment, continue to contribute to homelessness in the region, make it harder for families who experience homeless to rebound, and stress service providers to the limit.

### **Employment in the Regional Economy**

Unemployment in Western Massachusetts has fallen over the last 13 months from 9.1 percent in December of 2010 to 7.5 percent in December of 2011, compared to the statewide level of 6.5 percent. The higher regional rate of unemployment is attributable to an unemployment rate of 8.2 percent in Hampden County, with the worst concentrations of unemployment in Springfield and Holyoke. These figures do not account for "underemployment" – employed people who are working part-time or temporarily but wish to find full-time work – or for the "discouraged" who have dropped out of the labor force and stopped seeking work. Figure 2 shows the seasonally unadjusted unemployment rate in each of the counties, the region and the state for the most recent 13 months.

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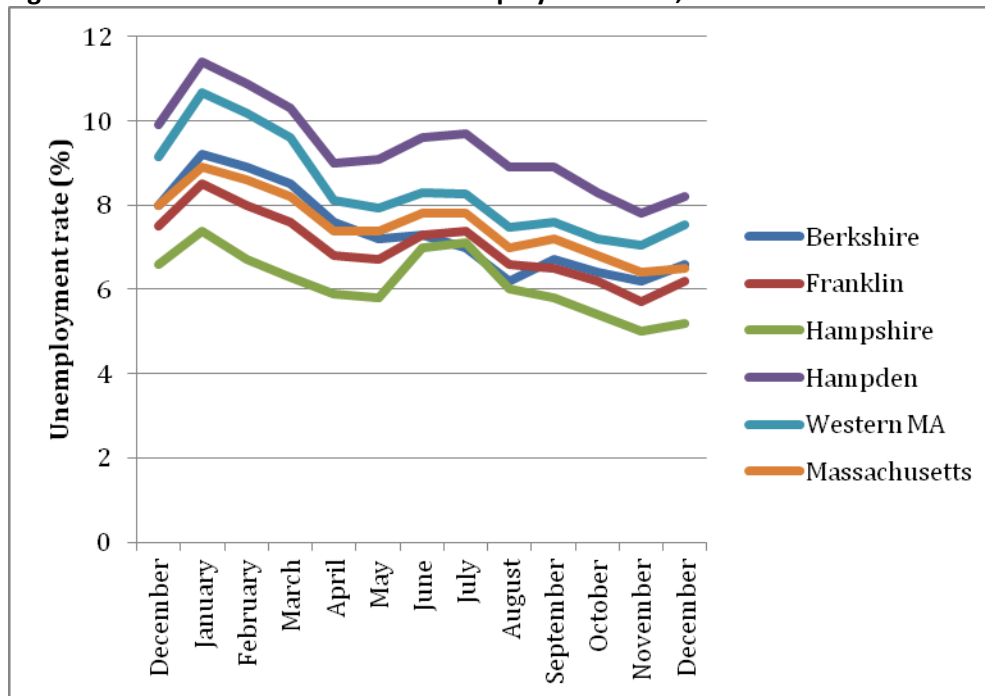
<sup>4</sup> American Community Survey, 2010 3-year Estimates. Available from [factfinder2.census.gov](http://factfinder2.census.gov).

<sup>5</sup> UMDI. "State of the Massachusetts Housing Market.: 2008. [www.massbenchmarks.org](http://www.massbenchmarks.org).

<sup>6</sup> Massachusetts Housing Partnership Foreclosure Monitor.

[http://www.mhp.net/vision/news.php?page\\_function=detail&mhp\\_news\\_id=283](http://www.mhp.net/vision/news.php?page_function=detail&mhp_news_id=283).

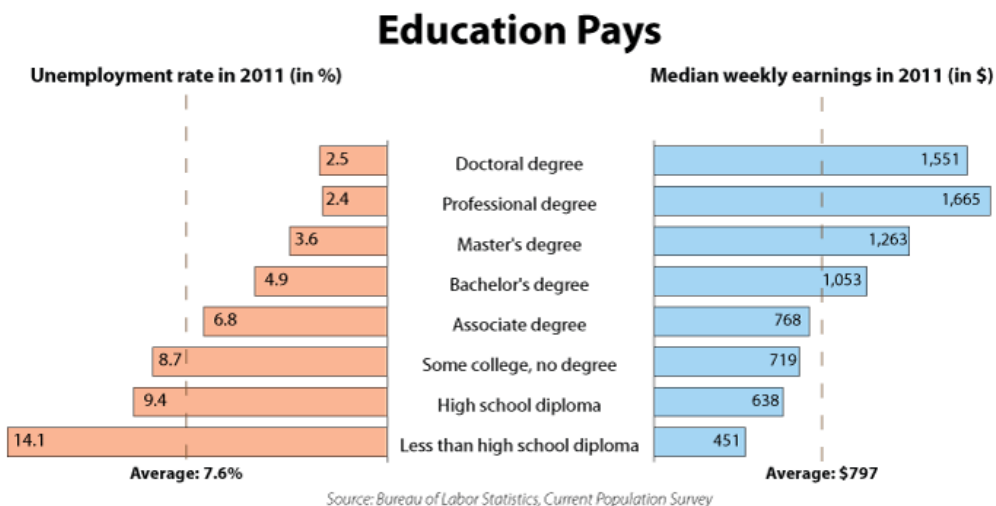
**Figure 1. Western Massachusetts Unemployment Rate, 2010**



Source: Massachusetts Labor Market Information. [www.mass.gov/lwd/economic-data/](http://www.mass.gov/lwd/economic-data/).

While reliable data for unemployment by educational attainment are not available at the state or sub-state level, the story from national data is striking: unemployment rates are far higher among those with lower education levels, and wages are far lower. Figure 3 shows the unemployment rate and median weekly earnings by educational attainment. For those with less than a high school diploma, unemployment was 50 percent higher and median weekly earnings were 40 percent lower than for those with a high school diploma.

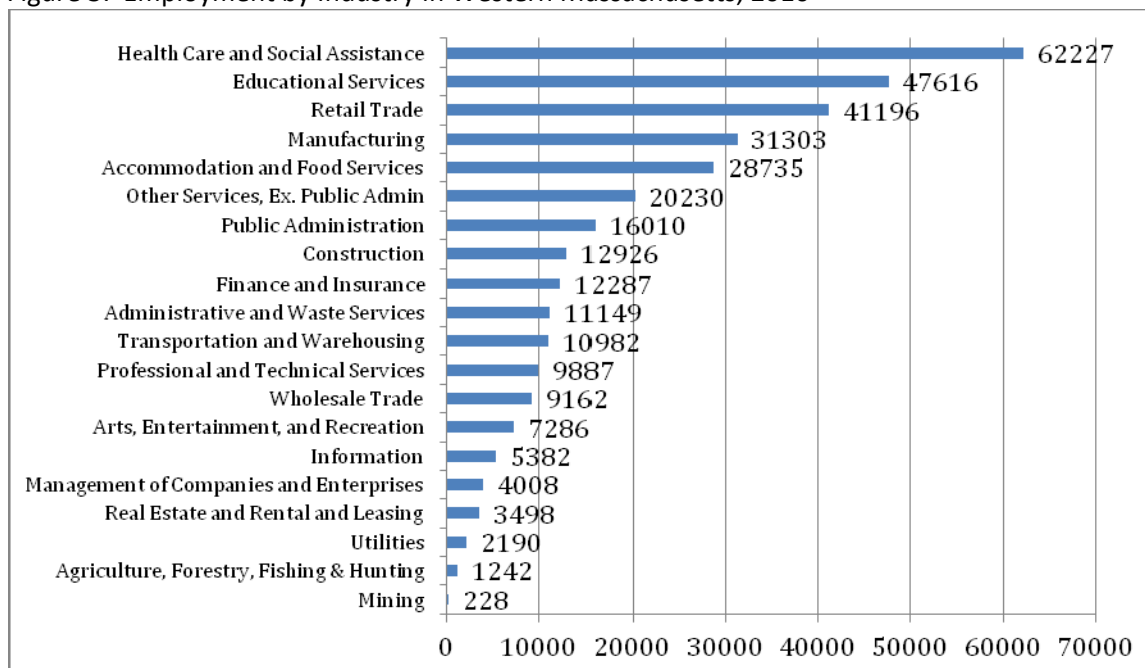
**Figure 2. Unemployment and Earnings by educational Attainment, U.S., 2011**



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, [http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep\\_chart\\_001.htm](http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm).

Major industries in Western Massachusetts include health care and social assistance (2010 average monthly employment was 62,227), educational services (47,616), retail trade (41,196), manufacturing (31,303) and accommodation and food services (28,735). Each of these industries provides opportunities for low-skilled workers; health care and manufacturing in particular offer opportunities for relatively well-paid work. Employment for major industry groups in Western Massachusetts in 2010 is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 3. Employment by Industry in Western Massachusetts, 2010



Source: QCEW Annual 2010. Extracted from <http://www.mass.gov/lwd/economic-data/employment-jobs/>.

Within each of these industries, the reality is that earning wages to support a family most often requires not only a high school diploma or GED, but an associate’s degree or some college. Crittendon Women’s Union identified a list of Massachusetts “hot jobs” in 2010 that require two years or less of post-secondary education, pay a family-sustaining wage and posted high vacancy rates. The list identified only two jobs that require only on-the-job training and a high school diploma or equivalency: correctional officers and supervisors of administrative workers – and even in those jobs, some post-secondary education provides an advantage to job-seekers.<sup>7</sup> The full list of ‘hot jobs’ appears in Appendix A. Similarly, an analysis of projected labor demands in New England found that despite current high levels of unemployment, the coming decade is likely to end with a greater demand for low and middle-skill workers – particularly for those with some college or an associate’s degree, but also for those with a high school diploma – than any other skill category, including those with a bachelor’s degree.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Youngblood, D.C. “Hot Jobs 2010: Promoting Economic Independence Through Informed Career Decisions.” March 2010. Available from [http://www.liveworkthrive.org/site/assets/docs/CWU\\_Hot\\_Jobs\\_2010\\_Report\\_March2010.pdf](http://www.liveworkthrive.org/site/assets/docs/CWU_Hot_Jobs_2010_Report_March2010.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Sasser Modestino, A. “Mismatch in the Labor Market: Measuring the Supply of and Demand for Skilled labor in New England.” Federal Reserve Bank of Boston New England Public Policy Center Research Report 10-2. November 2010.

What these and other studies make clear is that all employment is not created equal. In order to reach a goal of supporting themselves, homeless families will need sustained assistance to either supplement inadequate wages, or achieve enough education and work experience to take advantage of promising career opportunities.

### **Homeless and At-Risk Families in Western Massachusetts**

Against a backdrop of a still struggling regional economy, family homelessness in Western Massachusetts has continued at higher than pre-recession levels. Family homeless shelters are perpetually full, leading to overflow usage of hotels and motels. While employment loss and foreclosure continue to be relevant, the majority of families experiencing homelessness are those that have always been at risk in any economy: single-parent households with low educational attainment and little work history. Almost one in ten people living in poverty experience some homelessness each.<sup>9</sup> The current economy, and accompanying high competition for jobs, simply makes the barriers to employment and self-sufficiency that much more difficult to scale.

The most recent year-long count of families served under Emergency Assistance (EA) in Western Massachusetts was 1,127 families entering the system within the region during state fiscal year 2011. This includes families in congregate and scattered site shelter, families housed in hotel/motels, and some families receiving stabilization or rental assistance. For the sake of this study, and for consistency with existing program regulations, the following definitions are used:

1. Homeless families are those who have entered the EA system and are currently in shelter, including congregate and scattered site shelters, and hotels and motels.
2. At-risk families are those who are housed, but meet the following criteria:
  - a. Income below 50 percent of Area Median Income (AMI); and
  - b. Have experienced a significant loss of income or increase in expenses; or
  - c. Are receiving time-limited assistance to prevent homelessness under various rental or household assistance programs.

The majority of the discussion and recommendations in this report center on families who have experienced homelessness and been served through the EA system rather than at-risk families, though their needs around employment are often similar.

Families in shelter in Western Massachusetts are most often headed by young parents with young children and low educational attainment. Sixty percent of heads of household of homeless families were 28 years old or younger, and 81 percent were 35 or younger. Sixty-seven percent had at least one child under the age of six, while 47 percent had at least one child under the age of three. Forty-eight percent of heads of household had less than a high school diploma or equivalent, and an additional forty percent had only a high school degree or equivalent. Only seven percent had some college, and five percent had attained a two or four-year college degree.

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<sup>9</sup> Pioneer Valley Committee to End Homelessness. "All Roads Lead Home: The Pioneer Valley's Plan to End Homelessness." February 2008.

While there are extremely limited data related to work and economic characteristics for homeless families, an analysis of the current limited data available from the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) maintained by the three Western Massachusetts Continua of Care (HUD-funded programs to address homelessness comprehensively and in partnership with other federal agencies), which covers EA families except those in hotels, motels and domestic violence shelters, appears in an accompanying analysis to be released separately.

## Findings

### Introduction

Information on specific conditions and priorities in Western Massachusetts was gathered through three major means: provider and community stakeholder listening sessions; customer focus groups; and front-line worker interviews.

#### Community Listening Sessions

At the beginning of the process, the research team held three open listening sessions in Northampton, Springfield and Pittsfield. These sessions were attended by nearly 70 representatives from dozens of organizations, including shelter and housing providers, domestic violence, career centers, Regional Employment Boards, city governments, adult basic education, community colleges, child care providers, regional transit authorities, employers and funders. Discussions focused on three major areas: major barriers to employment for homeless families; major barriers faced by organizations serving homeless families; and suggestions for program or policy directions to improve services.

#### Customer Focus Groups

The research team conducted two customer focus groups hosted by Square One in Springfield and by the Franklin County Regional Housing & Redevelopment Authority in Greenfield. Participants were recruited by regional service providers and were limited to heads of household of families currently in the shelter system, and were asked to discuss their experiences related to work and related support services. Participants were provided with lunch and a stipend and transportation was provided for most. Sixteen heads of household participated.

#### Front Line Worker Interviews

Service providers use a variety of names for workers who interact directly with homeless customers as case managers, counselors, and shelter managers, and we refer to these workers uniformly as “front line workers.” We interviewed 12 front line workers and managers representing each of the three major service areas in Western Massachusetts, asking about barriers to employment, related services, referrals, and recommendations for improvement.

#### Homeless Management Information System Data Review

The three Western Massachusetts Continua of Care (Berkshire, Springfield and Three-County) each maintain separate HMIS data and provided these data for this report. An analysis of these data, including their quality and completeness, appears in an accompanying data report. A limited set of recommendations for outcome measurement and related data practices appear in this report.

## Barriers to Employment and Self-Sufficiency

*"[B]ecause [as] soon as I get the [child care] voucher, I was out there searching for jobs, I can't get a job if I don't have a GED. It's all a circle."* – Western Massachusetts homeless parent

Homeless families face numerous barriers to work, and these barriers are both complex and interrelated. An overview of the most significant barriers follows. For homeless and at-risk families, any additional challenge can mean the difference between keeping a job and losing one.

### Job Experience and Education

*"I've been asking to get in GED classes forever."* -- Western Mass homeless parent

As noted previously, the vast majority of homeless family householders in Western Massachusetts have a high school diploma or equivalency or less. Many also have little work experience, or no recent work experience, and many need skill development in how to search for and maintain a job. However, the services of mainstream resources like the career centers are not tailored to the complex needs of homeless families, and at least in the urban Springfield/ Holyoke area, GED and English as a Second Language (ESOL) classes often have wait lists.

### Job Market for Low-Skilled Workers

*"I'm going to be starting a volunteer job [...], which I'm actually wicked excited about because I haven't worked in a year, and that's been really hard."* -- Western Massachusetts homeless parent

*"So they kicked me off [welfare] because I had a job, which [I] was barely able to pay rent with."* – Western Massachusetts homeless parent

The work prospects of homeless families are affected by the current economic climate, with its still-high unemployment and intense competition for jobs. Even more significant, the typical homeless head of household, with little work experience and educational attainment of a high school or GED or less, faces a great challenge to find a job at self-sufficiency wages even in good economic times. Homeless heads of household who do work most often work part-time at low wages, not earning enough to offset any loss in income-tested benefits.

### Funding

Across the three community listening sessions, the overarching obstacle to providing improved services to homeless families for work readiness and support was insufficient and inconsistent funding. Providers cited both insufficient funding to adequately address the multiple barriers their customers face, and a history of successful programs that were cut after only a few years in operation. Overloaded caseworkers, with caseloads reaching as high as 70 or 80 families per worker in some cases, pay cuts and lay-offs were all cited as evidence of insufficient funding.

Providers identified both lack of sufficient funding, and ever-changing funding priorities as challenges. From 2009 to 2012, state funding for homeless programs shifted repeatedly, and several programs were cut. Most significantly, in 2009 the state shifted responsibility for homeless programs from the



Department of Transitional Assistance to the Department of Housing and Community Development, and in August 2011 the state created the HomeBASE program, which was intended to shift funds away from the EA system and transition most homeless families from a shelter-based to a housing first model, and which provided short-term rental assistance until enrollment was severely curtailed in October 2011 due to insufficient funds. During the recession, state funds were both cut and reallocated, though additional federal and state funds for similar programs partially compensated for these effects. From 2009 to 2012, funding for Emergency Assistance shelter increased as increasing numbers of eligible families sought shelter, and federal funding in related areas allowed a moderate increase of \$1.8 million in inflation adjusted dollars to the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP), but funding for most related programs decreased: Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) experienced a \$5.4 million cut, and public housing authorities have experienced a \$6.3 million cut. The Governor's proposed budget for 2013 increases funding for HomeBASE.

At the time of this writing, the Governor's proposed 2013 budget includes proposed increases to MVRP, RAFT, and public housing, and shifts funding from Emergency Assistance to HomeBASE. At the same time, the Governor's budget proposed a \$10 million increase targeted to community colleges, with the goals of reducing unemployment and closing the achievement gap; and an \$8.1 million reduction in funding for child care subsidies. Each of these budget items has funding implications for providing homeless families with resources in their struggle toward self-sufficiency.

Of course, the role of private funding in providing services to disadvantaged populations is also significant. At a time of growing need, philanthropic support suffered during the recent recession, and has only recently begun to rebound. Support from a large number of foundations is an indispensable resource for anti-homelessness and anti-poverty programs in Western Massachusetts and elsewhere.

A 2009 analysis by the National Alliance to End Homelessness found that fewer than 10 percent of 10-year plans to end homelessness included funding sources, one of four factors considered central to successful implementation. Providers are often resourceful in their search for funding, but face increased needs, a depleted state budget, and an extremely difficult fundraising climate.

## Housing

*"I was staying in a hotel for a little while. I mean, I was there for two to three months before I got enough money to go on my own."* –Western Massachusetts homeless parent

The state's budget challenges and limited supply of subsidized and affordable housing options point to a specific barrier for homeless families: the continued challenge in achieving rapid re-housing for homeless families. Meanwhile, restrictions and a lack of suitable housing mean that many homeless families spend months struggling to find a suitable place to live.

As of March 6, 2012, there were 412 families in Western Massachusetts living in hotels or motels in the cities of Springfield, West Springfield, Chicopee, Holyoke and Greenfield. Many families placed in hotels and motels wait months before moving on to more suitable shelter options. Supportive services typically offered in traditional, congregate or scattered site shelters are generally unavailable in hotels.

Families who moved to scattered site shelters and/ or received assistance with their own apartment also reported ongoing difficulties with housing and stabilization, including but not limited to: the difficulty of finding a lead-certified apartment for families with children under six years old as required; continued

difficulty with utility arrearages; and limitations on apartment size (for instance, a family with two adults and four children is eligible for only a 1-bedroom apartment).

### **Child Care**

*“But how are you supposed to look for a job when you don't have anyone to watch your kids? Are you supposed to bring your kids with you to the interview?”* - Western Massachusetts homeless parent

*“One thing I think they need to focus on most of all, is the child care vouchers for the homeless shelter families.”* – Western Massachusetts homeless parent

Homeless families and providers alike stressed the extreme need for child care for homeless heads of household who are unemployed and seeking work. In particular, there is a widespread need for occasional or drop-in child care to enable families to conduct a job search, go to interviews, attend meetings with caseworkers, and search for housing, all of which can take considerable time and coordination.

Child care vouchers are available to homeless families who work or are in school full-time. Even then, families have to overcome many obstacles, including a lack of early morning, after-hours or weekend child care to accommodate many types of jobs, such as second or third shift jobs (including relatively lucrative manufacturing jobs); securing both a voucher and finding any open child care spot to accept a voucher with little advance notice before a start date for a new job; and a lack of options for care for children with special needs. Likewise, families may not receive a voucher (or may end up on a wait list) if they have reached the time limit allotted for receiving TAFDC, if they receive SSI or SSDI or Unemployment Compensation.

### **Transportation**

Transportation difficulties pose issues for rural and urban homeless families alike. Urban families contend with the price of a bus pass, but also with complicated schedules that necessitate traveling between shelter or apartment, child care, work or school, and various appointments. Bus travel between shelter, child care and work can often require multiple transfers and several hours of travel each day. Coordinating a work and child care schedule with bus transportation can be impossible, especially at many manufacturing and service jobs where hours may include evenings and weekends, and may offer relatively higher wages but require second or third shift work.

Rural families in particular, including those in Franklin and Berkshire counties, contend with transportation difficulties. Where public transportation exists at all, there are often limited or nonexistent bus schedules on evenings and weekends, and infrequent buses even during normal service hours, with buses often running only every three hours.

### **Linkages and Interactions between Systems**

Providers of direct services to homeless families in Western Massachusetts have strong ties and often work together closely. Shelter providers have at times provided employment services, and at least one Career Center in the region employs a homeless outreach specialist. However, deep cooperation and ties between shelter and workforce providers have been neither systematic nor sustained.

Homeless families often find it difficult to make use of the workforce system for a variety of reasons: the lack of child care during job search activities, the impression that the workforce system leaves them to independently search computer listings for jobs, and the fact that many heads of household lack the work experience and skills, and do not meet the criteria for work readiness that the workforce system is best equipped to serve. Additionally, career centers face disincentives to serve customers with multiple barriers to employment, with funding conditional on job placement measures.

The role of TAFDC and the Department of Transitional Assistance is another significant factor for many homeless families. Especially for homeless families living in hotels or motels, a DTA worker may be their primary contact with systems that can provide support and services. However, DTA caseloads are often high, DTA-sponsored education and training opportunities are inconsistently available, and TAFDC regulations are often not conducive to customers receiving significant assistance and support. Many homeless families have had negative experiences with TAFDC's rules and the system overload, and this in turn is often interpreted as a lack of system support for them to achieve work and self-sufficiency.

Finally, families and providers noted that the multitude of services offered at different locations, with different eligibility rules and paperwork, created unnecessary challenges in accessing related services and created a climate in which both families and providers spent significant amounts of time dealing with administrative tasks.

### **Continuum of employment services**

Homeless heads of household face challenges to conducting a job search, securing a job, and keeping a job once they are able to find one. Established employment services usually offer pre-employment services, including training in relevant skills, such as computers, communication and soft skills, resume writing, interviewing skills and more. Homeless families could usually benefit from many of these services, but these alone are not enough.

Successful employment programs involve relationships with employers and often involvement in the placement process itself. Furthermore, for many homeless families, a lack of significant previous work experience and related communication skills, and a scarcity of resources to deal with challenges like a sick child, loss of child care or change in transportation status can jeopardize their ability to hold a job. The fact that employment often does not mean increased income, due to low wages, part-time schedules, and often a simultaneous loss of TAFDC benefits also means that employment itself is not nearly enough to move families into self-sufficiency. For all these reasons, a lack of continued support and coordination after employment can threaten a family's path to success.

### **Other Barriers**

*"[T]he reason why I ended up in a hotel is [be]cause my light bill was too high."* –Western Massachusetts homeless parent

*"I've been asking for mental health, a counselor, forever."* – Western Massachusetts homeless parent

Homeless families each have a unique story, and while the above barriers affect most of them, a variety of other barriers to employment and self-sufficiency are also both common and difficult to address. These include low English proficiency, criminal record, failure to receive child support, poor credit scores (which can affect the ability to find permanent housing and a job), domestic violence, disability, mental

health issues, and substance abuse, among others. Because the barriers that any particular family faces can be so varied, no one-size-fits-all approach to employment would be effective.

## **Best Practices and Promising Programs**

A review of literature and related programs was conducted to identify the most promising program and policy directions in the effort to connect homeless families to work and related services and ultimately move toward self-sufficiency. Well-designed research on the needs of homeless families as a distinct population is lacking, but promising approaches from groups that overlap or face similar multiple interrelated barriers are available. Research documents successful programs and approaches for welfare recipients (and most homeless families are or have been welfare recipients), people with mental and physical disabilities, and at-risk youth. Innovative and promising programs for families and individuals living in poverty have also been documented, and though their effectiveness may not have been as well documented as that of many best practices, we highlight them here because they provide a potential way to address fundamental and long-standing problems of inadequate resources that have kept well-recognized best practices from having the full impact they promise. The following reviews a selection of some of the best-regarded research and most innovative programs for both programmatic and advocacy purposes.

### **Earnings Supplements and Savings Accounts**

Though it may seem to state the obvious, the primary barrier faced by homeless families is simply a lack of money. Programs that seek to “make work pay” or to otherwise increase the financial resources of low-income families have been shown to be effective at increasing their earning potential.

Typically, welfare recipients lose income or break even when they find work, because they lose benefits with their increased earnings. Two programs based in Canada and Minnesota showed increased earnings and employments when welfare recipients continued to receive substantial earnings supplements after they secured a job. The supplements served both as an incentive to work and to offset work-related costs such as transportation or clothing. The Minnesota program also required participation in job training activities and streamlined multiple programs into one (including various cash assistance and food stamps programs). Both programs showed increased earnings and employment for participants, though the Minnesota program showed significant results only for long-term welfare recipients. However, participants in both programs reverted to previous earnings and employment participation after the programs ended.<sup>10</sup>

Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) programs sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) have served families in both public housing and those who receive aid through Section 8. The goals of the programs are to help families move toward economic independence and self-sufficiency, and they do so by providing targeted case management and by providing a financial mechanism for families to create savings. Families who participate in these programs receive an escrow account, and deposits are made to these accounts based on increased earnings by family members. If family members successfully complete goals determined in their FSS “contract,” and are independent of

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<sup>10</sup> Social Programs that Work. [http://evidencebasedprograms.org/wordpress/?page\\_id=1080](http://evidencebasedprograms.org/wordpress/?page_id=1080).

welfare assistance, they may collect the funds in the account at program completion. Under certain circumstances, families may also draw on the funds for related goals like education. While a rigorous analysis of these program's success is not yet complete, a retrospective analysis of these programs from 1996 to 2000 found significant gains in incomes for program graduates (a median income increase of 72 percent over 4 years), and a median escrow account value of over \$3,000 for graduates at program completion. However, the study also noted that most participants in the FSS program did not graduate, and this and other studies have found that FSS participants with higher education levels and work readiness at program start achieved better results than those with lower education and work readiness.<sup>11</sup>

### **Jobs-First**

Much of the strongest evidence for successful welfare-to-work programs comes from jobs-first programs. Studies of programs in Los Angeles, Portland, Oregon, and Riverside, California showed increases in employment and earnings and decreases in welfare dependency. These programs were all strongly mandatory (in that participants could lose benefits if they did not meet program participation requirements) However, earnings increases in these programs were balanced by losses of welfare benefits, and these programs targeted only parents whose youngest child was over a certain age, ranging from one year to five years.

- Los Angeles Jobs-First Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN) operated from 1995 to 1998, providing orientation and a three-week job club that assisted participants with job search, resume writing, interviewing and other skills. Participants then conducted a two-week supervised job search. Program staff also organized job fairs and utilized relationships with employers. The program resulted in 25 percent higher earnings and 23 percent more time employed for program participants than for a control group. Follow-up was limited to two years; it is not known whether participants experienced increased earnings after that.
- Riverside (California) Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN) was part of the California GAIN initiative that operated from the late 1980s through the mid 1990s, and steered participants into one of two service streams. Participants were screened for basic education needs, including lack of a high school diploma or GED, or lack of basic math or English skills. Participants without basic education needs either participated in a job search consisting of a job club or supervised job search similar to the components of the Los Angeles program described above, and participants with basic education needs were given a choice of education or going directly to job search. Participants who did not find a job at the end of job search were reassessed and directed to either education or training, unpaid work experience, or continued job search. Participants had 42 percent higher annual earnings and 38 percent higher quarterly employment than a control group over five years of follow-up.<sup>12</sup>
- Portland (Oregon) Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) training program operated in the 1990s and directed participants to either basic education or job search. The program was unique in that it encouraged participants to turn down lower-paying jobs and look for a job that

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<sup>11</sup> Robert C. Ficke, Andrea Piesse. Evaluation of the Family Self-Sufficiency Program: Retrospective Analysis, 1996-2000. April 2004. Available from <http://www.huduser.org/portal/publications/selfsufficiency.pdf>. Lalith de Silva, Imesh Wijewardena, Michelle Wood, Bulbul Kaul. Evaluation of the Family Self-Sufficiency Program: Prospective Study. February 2011. Available from <http://www.huduser.org/portal/publications/FamilySelfSufficiency.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> These effects were much weaker at the seven to nine year follow-up, but by then the control group had been allowed to join the GAIN program. It is not clear whether the original GAIN participants lost ground or the original control group caught up.

paid well above minimum wage and provided benefits and potential for advancement. Over five years of follow-up, participants had 25 percent higher annual earnings and 21 percent higher employment than a control group.<sup>13</sup>

### **Supportive Housing and the Sound Families Initiative**

The \$40 million, multi-year Sound Families program for homeless families was established in 2000 in Washington with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation as a supportive housing model of over 1,400 units. Case studies of implementation across three counties, nine providers and ten housing sites mostly shared several key features: intensive goal-oriented case management with an average caseload of 15; referral to outside providers for intensive education, job training or mental health services; encouragement for peer support and community-building; and a termination of support services after the average 12-month stay. Of the work and income-related outcomes, forty-eight percent of families in the program increased their incomes, while another 40 percent had level incomes. Forty-five percent of primary caregivers were employed at program exit compared to 22 percent at program entry, and full time employment tripled. Many families with severe mental health or substance abuse problems dropped out, or were asked to leave the program. Most families also secured permanent housing on program exit, though only 12 percent were able to sustain permanent housing without some form of assistance.<sup>14</sup>

### **Supported Employment and Post-Employment Support**

Supported employment programs have been shown to enhance employment and earnings for people with mental and physical disabilities, as well as chronically homeless people. Evidence from multiple programs supports the success of supported employment using an “Individual Placement and Support” model for people with severe mental illness, showing improved job placement and tenure.<sup>15</sup> These models involve goal-oriented counseling and support, and are similar to a jobs-first approach. Successful outcomes often involve participants moving from supported to competitive employment.

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<sup>13</sup> Social Programs that Work. [http://evidencebasedprograms.org/wordpress/?page\\_id=1080](http://evidencebasedprograms.org/wordpress/?page_id=1080).

<sup>14</sup> The Northwest Institute for Children and Families. Final Findings Report: A Comprehensive Evaluation of the Sound Families Initiative. September 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Schizophr Bull. 2011 Mar;37(2):370-80. Epub 2009 Aug 6. Who benefits from supported employment: a meta-analytic study. Campbell K, Bond GR, Drake RE.

## Volunteer Models

Volunteer programs, when well-managed, can both provide extra support to overloaded programs and case workers, and can help to build support as part of a successful advocacy initiative.

Founded in 1998, LIFT is a volunteer-based poverty assistance program that currently operates in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and Washington, DC. Recognizing that individual relationships can be transforming, the program recruits student volunteers to serve as case workers for people in poverty, performing many of the same functions as professional case workers: applying for and researching available benefits and services, assisting with internet job searches and resume writing, housing searches and more. The model benefits are twofold: customers receive additional technical help and encouragement, and student volunteers express an increased commitment to fighting poverty.

This program model emphasizes that not only does it serve customers in poverty, but it cements a commitment to working on issues of poverty for volunteers. Seventy-eight percent of student volunteers said that their experience influenced their career plans.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) is a national model that connects retired people with volunteer opportunities. This model has been used with success in Western Massachusetts, and provides a promising additional avenue to make the most of limited human resources.

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<sup>16</sup> [www.liftcommunities.org](http://www.liftcommunities.org)

## Action Steps

This section describes and lays out a timeline for recommendations. Action steps are organized on a two-year timeline in keeping with the intentions of the Fireman Foundation in funding this project, though the success of this program will depend on its operating long-term. Implementation of the action plan will be overseen by a Steering Committee to be formed by Western Mass Network to End Homelessness and supported by partner organizations. While this action plan has been developed with the benefit of broad knowledge about what works and insight into regional providers' resources and experiences, successful implementation will rely on continual reevaluation, flexibility, and coordination among a large number of partner agencies throughout the region. In addition to programmatic recommendations, an analysis of the use of the Homeless Management Information System and recommendations for outcome measurement will appear in a separate report.

### Employment Specialists

*"It's an emotional thing we have to go through, to fight for everything we need."* – Western Massachusetts homeless parent

While homeless families often have multiple caseworkers, including a housing worker and a welfare worker, and may have interacted at times with a career counselor and others, these workers often have large case loads, lack experience with or may even face programmatic disincentives to serve homeless families. The core recommendation of this action plan amounts to what might be called a "housing-and-jobs-first" model, though the creation of an employment specialist position to assist homeless customers.

An employment specialist would be a devoted case worker who would provide individualized support at to customers at their places of shelter or another convenient location to help the customer not only become employed but also maintain employment. Unlike existing front line workers, the employment specialist's focus would be on achieving employment. This role would involve working directly with both customers and employers to build customer's work experience and employability. Specific roles and responsibilities for the employment specialist are outlined in the action plan steps below, and include:

- Develop a positive, trusting relationship with customers<sup>17</sup>
- Stress the importance of work for self-esteem and as a first step to building a career
- Help customers build a work "portfolio" of important documents
- Encourage customers to build and maintain social support networks
- Assess customer's employment readiness and pre-employment needs

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<sup>17</sup> Sound Families Initiative; Erin B. Godfrey, Hirokazu Yoshikawa. Caseworker–Recipient Interaction: Welfare Office Differences, Economic Trajectories, and Child Outcomes. *Child Development*. Volume 83, Issue 1, pages 382–398, January/February 2012; *Child Development*. Howard S. Bloom, Carolyn J. Hill, James A. Riccio. Linking program implementation and effectiveness: Lessons from a pooled sample of welfare-to-work experiment. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*; Volume 22, Issue 4, pages 551–575, Autumn (Fall) 2003.



- Build and maintaining relationships with employers
- Provide ongoing support to employees and employers after placement
- Coordinate customer's access to related services by maintaining relationships with other case workers.

Because of the complexity of this role and the widely acknowledged impact of high caseloads on the effectiveness of case workers, each full-time employment specialist should have a caseload of approximately 15-20 families to allow an average of approximately one hour per family, per week.

### **Increased Coordination**

More than just providing referrals, the employment specialist should work directly with front line workers at shelter and housing organizations, employment, education and training organizations including community colleges, literacy and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, child care organizations, and others to engage in problem-solving and address barriers for individual clients. Furthermore, addressing barriers is often most successful when unique solutions can be found without relying exclusively on established programmatic or policy directions. For these reasons, direct coordination between these service providers should be facilitated to better meet the needs of all customers. To this end, we propose regular, monthly meetings between front line workers at related organizations to engage in problem-solving for individual families, familiarize workers with available programs and service, and update across organizations on changes to available services. To mitigate the time demands on providers, these meetings could be combined with existing meetings where possible, and over time the frequency could be adjusted as systems improve. Lessons learned from these collaborations should be shared with high-level staff to inform programmatic directions.

### **Employment Opportunities**

Providers can both serve as employers themselves and leverage existing community and business relationships to look for additional avenues for employment. Many providers already offer employment or volunteer opportunities to customers, and these can provide valuable work experience. Such commitments should be encouraged, and lessons learned shared among providers and in the development of relationships with other employers. While the employment specialist's role is to develop and maintain relationships with current employers, high-level staff should make a clear commitment to developing new and existing relationships wherever possible. Workforce organizations are well-poised to lead the way in strengthening and building relationships with employers. Coordination and communication should ensure that there is no duplication of existing efforts, and that a "single point of contact" is deployed to communicate with business partners.

## **Volunteer Support**

This component of the action plan makes use of abundant local resources, both retired people and professionals and college (and graduate) students, to help address the issue of underfunded, overloaded case workers in the shelter system and as another source of support and positive relationships for homeless families. In addition to a growing retired population, the region is home to many colleges, notably the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Springfield College, which were both cited in USA Today as two of the top colleges nationally for community service. A limited number of qualified volunteers would apply for a position, and receive training and supervision. Volunteers would also be encouraged and trained to act as ambassadors to their friends and families, and to actively participate in advocacy efforts. The volunteer program would require a devoted coordinator, likely a part-time position housed at one of the shelter organizations.

Action Step	Responsibility	Time	Estimated cost per year
<b>1. Employment Sepcialists</b>			\$50,000 - \$65,000 per full-time position*
a. Establish Position			
i. Designate organization to house Employment Specialist	Steering Committee	Month 1	
ii. Design and implement system for outcome measurement	WMNEH Data Analyst	Months 1-3	
iii. Secure funding for first Employment Specialist position	Steering Committee	Months 1-3	
iv. Hire for position	Specialist's organization	Months 4-6	
v. Identify/ design assessment tool for employee readiness	Employee Specialist	Months 7-8	
vi. Enroll approximately 25 participants in pilot program	Employee Specialist	Months 9-12	
b. Begin Serving Customers			
i. Assess participants for work readiness	Employee Specialist	Months 9 on	
ii. Develop individual goals and plans	Employee Specialist & Customers	Months 9 on	
iii. Begin job search or pre-employment services as planned	Employee Specialist & Customers	Months 9 on	
iv. Reassess and redirect customers as needed	Employee Specialist & Customers	Months 9 on	
v. Provide post-employment support	Employee Specialist	Months 9 on	
c. Hold meetings to evaluate and assess program and inter-organizational coordination	Steering Committee, Partner Organizations	Every 6 months	
<b>2. Increased Communication</b>			No additional funding
a. Contact all target coordinating agencies, by sub-region	Steering Committee	Months 1-3	
a. Establish monthly meetings for front-line workers	Provider partner organizations	Months 4-6	
b. Assess coordination and lessons learned	Steering Committee, Partner organization heads	Every 6 months	
<b>3. Employer Relationships</b>			No additional funding
a. Identify employer partners	Steering Committee, Partner organizations	Months 6-12	
b. Secure provider-as-employer commitments	Steering Committee, Partner organizations	Months 1-4	
c. Employment Specialist works with customers' employers	Employment Specialist	Months 9 on	
<b>4. Volunteer Coordinator</b>			\$40,000 - \$45,000 per full-time position*
a. Develop agreements with partner organizations	Steering Committee	Months 11-13	
b. Develop volunteer training	Employment Specialist or Designated Provider Organization	Months 14-16	
c. Begin accepting volunteer applications	Employment Specialist or Designated Provider Organization	Months 17 on	
*Note: Estimated costs include salary, benefits, overhead, supervision and travel, and assume a fringe benefit rate of 30% and overhead of 10%.			

## Conclusion

While there is good evidence and wealth of experience about what works to help families achieve and sustain employment, these best practices are often not implemented due to their complexity, a lack of adequate funding, a lack of consistency from policy makers, and silos in which service providers operate. This action plan lays out an ambitious, but promising path to help families achieve employment and get on the road to self-sufficiency. By breaking down barriers and fostering a renewed focus on employment, this process should also help to catalyze employment support and a shared sense of vision among partner organizations.

Many of the barriers that have been identified require much larger solutions, and the need for ongoing advocacy around related issues – not limited to just homelessness or housing – is clear. Appropriate, nontraditional issues for advocacy by homeless service providers might include, but are not limited to:

- Making work pay: earnings supplements, changes to welfare receipt rules, increasing the Earned Income Tax Credit and similar work incentives;
- Increasing financial support for and participation in programs like the Family Self-Sufficiency program;
- Increasing access to child care through funding and access to vouchers, Early Head Start and Head Start;
- Increasing access to education, especially GED and vocational/ certificate programs;
- Restructuring outcomes measurement and incentives in the workforce system to open the doors to people with multiple barriers;
- Increasing funding for public transportation, especially targeted to populations in need.

Meeting the need for funding and vigilant advocacy around these issues presents opportunities for ever-expanding collaboration and shared interests across regional and programmatic boundaries.

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## Appendix A

### Hot Jobs 2010

Jobs	Vacancies	Wage 75th Percentile	Education/ Training Required
<b>Computer and Data Systems</b>			
Computer Support Specialists	194	\$70,180	AA
Computer Programmers	132	\$100,160	AA or BA
Network Systems and Data Communications	108	\$98,000	AA or BA
<b>Health Care</b>			
Registered Nurses	2,479	\$97,160	AA or BA
Radiologic Technologists and Technicians	140	\$78,750	AA
Diagnostic Medical Sonographers	104	\$84,210	AA
Dental Hygienists	117	\$85,550	AA
<b>Office and Administrative Support</b>			
First-line Supervisors/Managers of Office and Administrative Support Workers	101	\$63,880	On-the-job training, work experience in related field
<b>Protective Services</b>			
Correctional Officers and Jailers	164	\$62,290	AA or on-the-job training
<b>Sales</b>			
Sales Representatives, Wholesale and Manufacturing (except technical and scientific)	127	\$84,160	AA or BA
Sales Representatives, Wholesale and Manufacturing (technical and scientific)	296	\$113,680	AA or BA

Source: [http://www.liveworkthrive.org/site/assets/docs/CWU\\_Hot\\_Jobs\\_2010\\_Report\\_March2010.pdf](http://www.liveworkthrive.org/site/assets/docs/CWU_Hot_Jobs_2010_Report_March2010.pdf)