



## Meeting Public Safety Needs: Housing for Registered Sex Offenders

### BACKGROUND AND MISSION STATEMENT

#### **Network Participants Include:**

Amherst Community Connection  
Berkshire County Sheriff Department  
Church in the Acres/Lion's Den  
City of Northampton  
College Church  
Congregation B'Nai Israel  
Cooley Dickinson Hospital  
Diocese of Springfield  
Eliot CHS-Homeless Services  
Franklin County Home Care Corporation  
Franklin County Sheriff's Department  
Grace Church  
Hairston House  
Hampden County Sheriff's Department  
Hampshire County Friends of the Homeless  
Hampshire County Sheriff's Department  
Haydenville Congregational Church  
Housing for All  
Jewish Community of Amherst  
MA Adolescent Sex Offender Coalition  
MATSA  
Mercy Medical Center  
Northampton Police Department  
Salvation Army  
ServiceNet  
Soldier On  
South Middlesex Opportunity Council  
Springfield Police Department  
Veterans Administration Medical Center  
Veterans Services

In March, 2009, the Massachusetts Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness launched the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness, one of ten networks across the state. Its mission is to prevent and end homelessness with a "housing first" approach, facilitating rapid re-housing and stabilization services to create permanent and stable housing.

Through the ongoing work of the Network's Individual Services Committee, one issue continued to rise to the surface: the lack of housing options for registered sex offenders. With the larger group's recognition that this issue deserved focused attention, in May 2011, the Western Massachusetts Network created the Work Group to House People with Sex Offense Histories. In so doing, it adopted the following mission:

*The mission of the Western Massachusetts Network's Work Group to House People with Sex Offense Histories is to maximize the safety of children, women and vulnerable others by minimizing the potential for re-offense through the identification and development of stable housing options for registered sex offenders who are committed to a positive and offense-free life.*

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TO GET CONNECTED

## **ACCOMPLISHMENTS TO DATE**

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*Since May, 2011, the Work Group has accomplished the following:*

- Expanded its coalition to include police departments, all four western county Sheriff Departments, numerous faith congregations and victim advocacy groups;
- Invited guest speakers to educate the group, including: Laurie Guidry, Psy.D., clinical and forensic psychologist and President of MATSA<sup>1</sup>, who quickly became a co-leader in this group's efforts; Richard Mercurio of the Sex Offender Registry Board; Fred Smith of St. Francis House in Boston and Rosa Blair, manager of private housing for people with sex offense histories in Springfield;
- Convened a Summit on Housing for Sex Offenders on February 1, 2012, involving over 50 participants, close to a dozen of whom were representatives from places of worship from across the region. The Summit provided education and training around the issue; facilitated discussion and gained further commitments of participation from faith-based groups;
- Convened a follow-up summit that featured special guest Rosa Blair, manager of a successful housing model for people with sex offense histories in Springfield;
- Produced a Guide for Congregations to assist faith leadership in supporting sex offenders while responding to congregational concerns;
- Produced an action plan that focuses on training and education for area housing providers that currently ban housing for all sex offenders;
- Provided educational seminars for Mercy Medical Center (6/27/12) and scheduled for Veterans Services (7/25/12);
- Scheduled first meeting on August 1, 2012, with HAP Housing, the region's largest housing provider, to discuss HAP tenant policies with regard to the issue of housing sex offenders.

## **GOALS MOVING FORWARD**

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*The Work Group's goals include:*

- Continue expansion of the coalition, ultimately including locally and state elected officials;
- Provide training and education to area housing providers to support change in policy banning housing for all sex offenders, relying instead on case-by-case determinations;
- Organize a cohesive voice to change state policy on sex offenders so that it better serves the public interest;
- Aid in the development and establishment of alternative housing options for registered sex offenders.

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<sup>1</sup> MATSA (MA Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers) is the Massachusetts chapter of an international organization whose mission is to end sexual abuse and sexual violence through the effective management and treatment of sexual abusers.

## PROMOTING PUBLIC SAFETY THROUGH HOUSING

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It makes intuitive sense to restrict registered sexual offenders from neighborhoods, nursing homes, rest homes and homeless shelters. They can represent a real threat to public safety and our sense of security. However, well-intended public policy has not kept pace with what is known to actually be effective in reducing recidivism among sex offenders. For instance, studies examining the impact of residency restrictions on sex offense recidivism demonstrate that there is no effect on reducing the incidence of sexual re-offense (MN, 2003, CO, 2004, MN, 2007). Unfortunately practices and policies have been put in place, such as restricting housing for sexual offenders that inadvertently operate to increase the risk of harm to the public.

*“(S)ex offenders without positive social support systems and stable employment recidivate at higher rates than those with jobs or ties to the community.” (Levenson 2008)*

Homelessness among sexual offenders contributes to a range of destabilizing factors that are associated with increased risk for sexual re-offense:

- Increases lifestyle instability and transience
- Fosters isolation and pushes sex offenders away from:
  - Social services and supports
  - Employment
  - Public transportation
- Can foster conditions that are conducive to re-offense:
  - Isolation
  - Negative mood states such as depression, hopelessness, anger
  - Increase substance use
  - Increase criminal associations
- Creates seemingly insurmountable barriers to successful community re-integration

A growing body of literature indicates that policies and practices that function to destabilize sexual offenders are operating to increase rather than reduce the threat to public safety they can represent, and cause more problems than they solve.<sup>2</sup>

## PROMISING PRACTICES

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In the move toward more evidence-based public policy approaches to managing public safety, there are a number of national and local models that have been developed that are proving to be beneficial in addressing the complex problem of housing sex offenders in the community while maximizing public safety:

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<sup>2</sup> CALCASA, 2006; Colorado Department of Public Safety, 2004; Hanson & Harris, 1998; 2001; Iowa County Attorneys Association, 2006; Kruttschnitt, et. al., 2000; NAESV, 2006; Nieto & Jung, 2006; Zandbergen & Hart, 2006.

## National Models (Kester, 2009)

### **The Fortune Academy**

Operated by the Fortune Society, NYC the Academy has developed tiered housing options for transitioning offenders and strongly advocates the importance of housing in prisoner transition. ([www.fortunesociety.org](http://www.fortunesociety.org))

### **Shared Living Arrangements (SLA)**

Despite fear that sex offenders living in close proximity will encourage re-offense, Colorado has found success congregating housing. SLA reduced recidivism rates and operates as an extension of both treatment and monitoring.<sup>3</sup>

### **Safer Foundation's Focus Apartments**

The Safer Foundation has provided employment placement for transitioning offenders and supports the Focus Apartment Building in Chicago, with ten apartments offering permanent housing for formerly incarcerated men with chronic or mental illness or significant substance abuse issues who would otherwise be homeless.<sup>4</sup>

**Bridges to Housing (B2H)** serves high-need homeless families in the Portland-Vancouver metro area by leveraging resources to fund community-based organizations. The program does not categorically exclude sex offenders, but screens for level of risk, appropriate supervision, partners with local correctional agencies and offers a public information campaign to educate the public on the effects of homelessness on sex offenders. ([www.bridgestohousing.org](http://www.bridgestohousing.org))

## Local Models

### **St. Francis House, Boston, MA**

In operation for 27 years, St. Francis House is a nonprofit, nonsectarian, 56 unit permanent housing service program that allows sex offenders and provides residents with support and the things they need “to reclaim their dignity and rebuild their lives: nutritious meals, clothing, access to medical care, counseling, vocational rehabilitation, and housing.”

### **“Rosa’s,” Springfield, MA**

An apartment complex in operation for decades that has established informal but substantive ties with probation, local law enforcement and community service providers in order to provide housing for registered sex offenders.

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<sup>3</sup> Colorado Department of Public Safety, Division of Criminal Justice, Sex Offender Management Board. *Report on Safety Issues Raised by Living Arrangements For and Location Of Sex Offenders in the Community*, prepared for the Colorado State Judiciary Committees, Senate and House of Representatives (March, 2004), 22-31.

<sup>4</sup> Best Practices for Affording the Rehabilitation of Affordable Housing, U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and research, September, 2006

## **FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS:**

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How can we begin to change the dialogue around this complex and provocative issue? How can we move toward an effective response to homelessness among sexual offenders so as to better serve public safety? Here are a few considerations:

- ▶ Create Community Partners: Build a coalition of educated, informed and invested stakeholders who have ability to make decisions that impact policy/practice;
- ▶ Develop housing options that are integrated with evidenced-based practices regarding what works to effectively manage and treat sexual offenders;
- ▶ Facilitate community education and support an increase in the investment for the prevention of sexual abuse;
- ▶ Engage the public:
  - Target outreach to real estate industry
  - Meet with landlords and neighborhood community organizations to address safety concerns and measures, understanding of their rights and responsibilities
  - Identify incentives for landlords with community assistance;
- ▶ Provide social support for transitioning offenders: mobilize knowledgeable non-offenders willing to provide frequent contact and support;
- ▶ Promote public understanding.

Through these ongoing efforts, the Western Massachusetts Network seeks to build awareness and consensus that housing registered sex offenders makes our community far safer than having them remain homeless. With that consensus, we aim to provide housing options for this population, in conjunction with the necessary support services to ensure both safety and the promise of a better future for the individual and community alike.

*For further information, please contact:*

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