



Housing First for Hampden,
Hampshire, Franklin and
Berkshire Counties

January 21, 2015

Dear Commissioners:

We are writing to request the opportunity to meet with you to discuss our efforts in Western Massachusetts to create safe housing options for individuals with sex offense histories and our related recommendations for state policy reform.

Over the last several years, The Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness has convened and facilitated its Work Group to House People with Sex Offense Histories to address the lack of housing available to individuals who have been convicted of sexual offenses, are required to register with their local police and have their place of residence made public by the State. We recognize that public safety as well the community and individual interests are best served through housing this population. Evidence demonstrates that an individual's housing stability markedly reduces the potential for re-offense.

Our work has included outreach to our region's non-profit housing providers to discuss their adoption of narrowly defined criteria when considering an applicant with a sex offense record. Through the course of our discussions, the housing directors made clear that so long as the State labels sex offenders as "dangerous" (see the SORB's welcome message on its home page), they do not feel it is responsible to house them. They feel their own hands are tied by the State's messaging on this population and have offered their assistance in pursuing state-level reform to reduce the liability risk to their own agencies.

The State's current leveling system also creates a significant barrier to housing as the level assigned to an individual frequently does not correspond to the risk they actually present. We sincerely hope this Commission will implement significant reform of the leveling process to better reflect current best practice, evidence-based indicators.

We would be pleased to bring our experience to the Commission in person and engage in a dialogue about how we can move forward together to create a system that maximizes public safety in the Commonwealth and allows for individuals with sex offense histories to re-integrate into the community and live positive, productive, offense-free lives.

We look forward to talking more.

Best,

Pamela Schwartz, Director
Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness