CHAPA Update: On Solid Ground Coalition and FY17 Budget

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Thank you for hosting me at your meeting this morning. We welcome invitations like these to come out to Springfield and Western Massachusetts whenever possible so that we can work together on our shared mission of helping everyone in the Commonwealth find a safe, decent, and affordable place to call home. Meetings and discussions like these also help us work better as an organization to represent your interests to policy makers in Boston and to inform our advocacy so thank you again for allowing CHAPA to participate. I will briefly discuss CHAPA, who we are, and what we do. I will then provide an update on the work of the On Solid Ground Coalition and an outline of our budget priorities for FY2017. I hope this will be a productive and useful discussion, so as I go through my remarks, please feel free to interrupt with any questions.

**INTRODUCTION TO CHAPA**

CHAPA’s mission is to encourage the production and preservation of housing that is affordable to low and moderate income families and individuals and to foster diverse and sustainable communities through planning and community development. We are an umbrella organization for affordable housing and community development activities in Massachusetts. We represent all interests in the housing field, including non-profit and for-profit developers, local housing providers and advocates, lenders, consultants, homeowners, tenants, foundation and government officials, and others. We have been around since 1967 and we appreciate the long-standing and continued support of many you in the room.

CHAPA pursues its goals through advocacy with local, state, and federal officials; research on affordable housing issues; education and training for organizations and individuals; programs to expand rental and homeownership opportunities; and coalition building among a broad array of interests in the housing and community development field. It is the last item on coalition building that brings me here today.

I will now turn to two coalitions that CHAPA convenes. The first – the On Solid Ground Coalition – focuses on cross sector collaboration to end family homelessness and promote economic mobility and stability. The second, the Building Blocks Coalition, brings together housing advocates to create a shared budget agenda for affordable housing, homelessness prevention, and community development programs.

**THE ON SOLID GROUND COALITION**

**Introduction**

Two years ago, CHAPA convened what has become the On Solid Ground Coalition. The Coalition is a cross-sector group of partners committed to a research-based approach to increasing housing stability and economic mobility for low-income families in Massachusetts. Through this approach, the Coalition aims to prevent and reduce homelessness.

It started as an offshoot of our Homelessness Committee. At the time, there was a disturbing increase in the number of homeless families entering the emergency shelter system in Massachusetts.

For those of us in the housing world, we grew frustrated because we knew that housing alone, standing in its own silo, could not be the only solution for the nearly 5,000 families staying in shelters or motels at the time. While we knew (and still know!) that access to a safe, affordable home is the foundation for any family – there are so many other pieces to the puzzle, so many other supports and resources, that we could not provide or that we were not experts in. So we reached out to many of our friends and partners, from child care and early education, public health and healthcare, workforce development, legal aide, domestic violence, and faith-based groups, with the simple task of bringing everyone together to end poverty and put families On Solid Ground.

With financial support from The Boston Foundation, the Oak Foundation, and the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley we worked with research partners at The Center for Social Policy and the Collins Center at UMass Boston as well as Mass. Budget and Policy Center. Together, we looked at the many factors that contribute to family instability; identified the gaps in programs meant to serve low-income families; and documented the federal and state programs and other resources and how they work together (or not, in more cases than we’re comfortable with) to support families. We interviewed homeless families, those at risk of homelessness, providers, public employees, and non-profit and business leaders to help inform our policy recommendations.

The outcome of this work was a report (which you can read on CHAPA’s website) that we released last February and a permanent Coalition that comes together every-other month to continue advocating for the resources and supports families need to achieve housing stability and economic mobility. The Coalition continues to grow today and I hope anyone here who wants to receive updates on our work will let me know and I can add you to the distribution list.

**Coalition Recommendations**

The Coalition recommends a four-pronged approach to help create a path to housing stability and economic mobility. I will quickly review these recommendations before moving onto current Coalition updates as they inform the work that we focus on today.

First, the Coalition recommends **systems change** to build a coordinated service delivery system across government departments and social service sectors. Ultimately, we want to create an environment were we get out of our silos – where the executive office of housing and economic development works together with health and human services. The coordinated system will support homelessness prevention and will work to minimize cliff effects (or the situation where a small increase in earnings can lead to a sharp reduction, or complete loss, of other benefits, that can leave a household worse off financially). This will help create a whole-person focused, goal driven, accountable, and adequately funded system.

The second recommendation focuses on **housing** – increasing the stock of affordable housing as well as rental assistance and vouchers for households with extremely low-incomes; and preserving existing private and publicly subsidized homes. This is where CHAPA brings its own expertise.

Third, we must increase **support services** to help incomes grow. This will ensure that parents can pursue job opportunities while ensuring their children have access to consistent, high-quality educational opportunities to learn and thrive. This also means increasing access to health and hunger supports, legal representation, workforce development, and providing trauma-informed case management and stabilization services.

Finally, we recommend **tracking progress**. We need to be able to measure outcomes and results through the collecting and analyzing of data, both at state agencies and non-profit providers. This will help us learn what works and what doesn’t while increasing accountability, effectiveness, and efficiency.

**Today’s Work of the On Solid Ground Coalition**

The Coalition is continues to grow and, again, we meet bi-monthly to discuss the Coalition’s work as well as the work of our members, including action items that may be supported by the full Coalition.

We’ve also received additional financial support from the Oak Foundation and Tufts to sustain our work. As part of this, we recently hired a full-time Coalition coordinator. The coordinator will lead the coalition and be the essential link between the coalition policy leads (CHAPA and Homes for Families) and the Center for Social Policy’s research team at UMass Boston. He will plan meetings, develop and help execute a shared policy agenda, grow our member base, and monitor progress.

The Center for Social Policy also continues our research efforts. Currently, we are working to create a map of existing programs that support homeless or those at risk of homelessness. This includes a matrix that compares eligibility standards, administering agencies, program rules and guidelines, and how they interact with each other. This will help to develop a narrative of a family facing the complicated service-delivery system, highlighting where specific improvements can be made.

**On Solid Ground Budget Priorities for FY2017**

As the FY2017 budget season approaches, we’ve also agreed on a shared budget advocacy agenda that reflect our four recommendations.

First, we’re asking for $120 million for the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program to restore funding to the levels reached in the 1990s when the program supported nearly double the amount of vouchers funded today. We are also working to raise vouchers to current fair market rents so that voucher holders can more easily secure housing.

Next, we are asking for $8 million in increased funding for HomeBASE funding. We are also seeking program changes. Currently, only families who are eligible for shelter under Emergency Assistance may receive HomeBASE assistance. We are asking for program eligibility to be expanded to allow families in domestic violence shelters and substance abuse program to access this resource. We are also asking for families to be allowed to renew HomeBASE annually until their income reaches 50% of the AMI in order to achieve the program goals of ensuring housing stability and preventing a fall back into homelessness.

For TAFDC Childcare, we are asking the Legislature to reinstate the 2007 policy that provides homeless families in shelter with immediate access to child care vouchers. Also for childcare, we are supporting $40 million in additional funds for a rate Increase to address the lack of a quality and consistent early education workforce. Like housing vouchers and the availability of a quality, affordable apartment, unless there is the infrastructure of a quality early education program, a child care voucher cannot be effective.

To help support the incomes of working families, we are also supporting another increase to the state earned income tax credit. We hope to expand the EITC to 50% of the federal credit from the current 23% of the federal credit, building on the momentum of last year’s increase.

Finally, to we are asking to improve data and reporting for the Emergency Assistance program. We would like to insert language to require the Department of Housing and Community Development report on reasons that families are determined not eligible for assistance, as well as basic demographics, income, and ages of children. This no-cost measure would provide valuable data to understand the Commonwealth's safety net, develop prevention programs, and any unintended consequences to regulations and policies.

We understand that we have big asks in a tight budget season but again, these are requests informed by data and research for proven effective programs that will help get promote economic mobility and housing stability.

**CHAPA FY2017 STATE BUDGET PRIORITIES**

For CHAPA’s FY2017 State Budget Priorities for affordable housing, homelessness prevention, and community development programs, please see the attached handout.