**Responses of Legislative Candidates to Questions about State Action Related to Housing and Homelessness**

*Provided by John Hornik, Chair,*

*Amherst Housing and Sheltering Committee*

In the weeks following the Forum on Homelessness in Amherst, I asked the six candidates for State Representative to respond to two questions about State Actions to Expand Housing and Other Services and Support to individuals and families who are homeless.  The questions were as follows:

1. What proposals would you offer to the State legislature to expand housing and other services and supports to individuals and families who are homeless?
2. Given that it is not easy for new House representatives to get traction for their ideas, what strategies would you follow in order to be successful in getting at least the House to adopt your proposals?

       Candidates were given about two weeks to respond and were limited to 400 words for each question.  They are presented below in the order they were received.  The only editing I did was to put them into a common format.  The answers show differences among the candidates in how they are currently thinking about these questions.  Collectively they offer an excellent roadmap to a potential Legislative agenda for the Amherst Community on housing and homelessness and well-worth you consideration.  I thank the candidates for their cooperation with this request.  John

**Solomon Goldstein-Rose**

**1. Proposals:**There are a number of ways we can expand affordable housing and support individuals and families who suffer from homelessness. For one, we need to protect and improve the funding for existing organizations and centers such as Craig’s Doors, Amherst Community Connections, and the Amherst Survival Center. These organizations work directly with homeless people as well as the economically vulnerable. The Amherst Survival Center is particularly important in providing meals, clothing, and basic clinical care. This is especially helpful in the case of some children and teens who rely on school lunches to provide them with three meals a day, and do not have that option during the summer. Some of these organizations receive direct state funding and other receive indirect funding, all of which needs to be protected in the annual budget process in the legislature.

    We also need to improve access to all forms of healthcare, including mental health care, which is often an issue for those who are chronically homeless. I plan to achieve this through establishing a comprehensive statewide commission on mental health care. Other related issues include the fact that LGBTQ+ youth are at increased risk of homelessness due to job discrimination and rejection by family. Besides better funding for places like Craig’s Doors and the Survival Center so these individuals can be provided with an extra meal and basic health care, we also need to be stricter at enforcing anti-discrimination laws in the workplace.

    To address the deeper cause of many people’s homelessness, we absolutely need more affordable housing in western MA. The state government can support surveys of public land to find more opportunities to build affordable housing developments. The legislature could help private employers offer housing assistance to those who want to stay in the area, potentially by offering businesses tax incentives to those who provide this housing. And the state could also invest in funds such as the Amherst Housing Trust Fund, which would be the most direct way to build affordable housing in the region.

**2.  Strategies.** If I am elected in the September 8th primary, I plan to meet with every representative in the legislature during the fall and beginning of the session, to introduce myself as someone who is interested in what they care about, ask for their thoughts on legislation, and offer my help to achieve their legislative priorities. On my proposals for homelessness, it will be important to meet specifically with leaders of a number of committees to hear their perspectives on ways to fund these proposals.

    These introductory meetings will allow me to establish friendly working relationships with fellow representatives, and will make it possible to connect ideas that other legislators note as priorities into bills that then have enough support to pass. Additionally, I’d like to work with local leaders of organizations serving homeless people to coordinate my inside advocacy with their hands-on perspective and voice, and be able to convince more legislators to make these services a priority.

**Lawrence O’Brien**

**1. Proposals:**An essential component of addressing any social problem is having sufficient monies to pay for my proposed solutions.  In the case of homelessness, I would propose raising the minimum wage so that it’s a living wage, which would be at least $15/hour, so that income earning adults can have more money to pay for rent or perhaps a subsidized mortgage.  Additionally, I would propose that the state legislature reverse the disastrous earned and unearned income tax cuts it passed between 1998 and 2002 that have cost our commonwealth roughly $3.3 billion in annual revenue.  If we don’t enact policies that raise incomes for citizens facing homelessness, along with policies that provide a revenue stream for programs, then we have created a zero-sum situation that will significantly impede a solution to the problem.

            Then, the next step is to enact policies that provide homes for individuals and families living with homelessness.  It’s as simple as that.  Shift money that is currently spent on placing people in hotels and shelters and instead spend it on permanent supportive housing. Spend more state tax revenue supplementing Section 8 vouchers so that families can rent in the private sector housing market, provide tax credits to building contractors that incentivizes construction of affordable housing (preferably in mixed income neighborhoods), reform zoning laws at the state level that encourages cities and towns to allow construction of more affordable housing, subsidize the construction of public housing in communities that are willing to have it and make these subsidies attractive by increasing Chapter 70 and other Local Aid.

            Once individuals and families are in housing, provide wrap-around support services for mental health, addiction, physical disabilities or other conditions that contribute to their having to live with homelessness.

**2.  Strategies.**As a twenty-five year veteran of the labor movement, I subscribe to the notion that legislative change happens, and economic and social problems are solved by collective action.  If I am fortunate enough to win this seat, I will not just be your state representative, I will be your legislative partner and the legislative partner of progressive organizations seeking to enact a progressive agenda.  What that means is that I will be responsible for making alliances and building coalitions with more senior (progressive) officials, advocating for policies within the House, while my progressive partner organizations and citizens will be pressuring the House to enact the laws that I and other legislators are advocating for in the House.  I teach History and I can think of no significant advancement in legislative policy that was not the result of a partnership between elected officials and mass movements.

**Eric Nakajima**

**1. Proposals:**Ending homelessness in the 3rd Hampshire District and Western Massachusetts must be a critical priority for anyone representing our district, as a matter of human rights and compassion.  The goal is ‘functionally zero’ homelessness, which means we have the resources, housing and system in place to keep or place more people in housing than become homeless.  I support the creation of a coordinating committee in Amherst to align and improve services and outreach to people who are homeless in the community.  I also believe that any sustainable solution to homelessness must be in partnership with regional organizations, and the funding of services and development of new housing should happen both at the local and regional level.

For our region to succeed, we need a greater investment in housing and homelessness prevention programs at the state level.  I will advocate for increased investments across the spectrum of need: more rental housing vouchers for permanent affordable housing; better funding for regional coordination, including the continuum of care; resources for prevention and diversion to keep people from homelessness (emergency assistance with rent or utility bills or down payments); and funding for supportive services for veterans or individuals with particular needs.

Beyond emergency services or support, there is an urgent need for greater housing production of all kinds, from single-person units to multi-family and permanent supportive housing for people with disabilities.  I will advocate for expanded availability of state programs, such as the Housing Innovations Fund and the state’s Low Income Housing Tax Credits to expand private non-profit production of housing. I will also advocate for direct construction of new public housing.  In both cases, I will work to ensure that associated state programs for site preparation, brownfields remediation or public infrastructure are invested to support new affordable and workforce housing.

    Finally, incidence of homelessness could be dramatically reduced by reducing poverty and raising wages.  I support the ‘fight for fifteen’ to raise the minimum wage to a living wage, because for many individuals and families, a fair wage will keep them from losing their homes.

**2.  Strategies.**  I have experience working with statewide leaders on homelessness and there is a natural legislative coalition that favors more services, housing development or better outcomes.  I will tap into existing coalitions – inside and outside the State House – and focus on linking ending homelessness to the broader, urgent need for more affordable housing across the state.

**Bonnie McCracken**

**Proposal I:**Housing subsidies are the most effective tool for reducing homelessness and we cannot afford more housing vouchers until we generate more revenue. I will propose to the State Legislature that the way to ensure more funds for vouchers is through raising the deed recording fees charged by the Registries of Deeds. I propose that we increase deed recording fees by $5.00-$10.00. Every time a house is sold, or mortgaged, the fees charged to record these documents will create new funds to subsidize more housing vouchers.

    Deed recording fees generated about $24,000,000.00, statewide, for the Community Preservation Act Trust Fund between November 2014 to October 2015. By increasing the deed recording fees by another $5.00 to $10.00, $6,000,000.00 to $12,000,000.00 could be generated to fund more housing vouchers.

**Proposal II:**I would propose to the State Legislature that we streamline the application process for receiving financial assistance. By streamlining the process, we will eliminate waste and create a more user friendly efficient system that is more responsible and responsive.

    The present SSI/SSDI/SNAP application process is very cumbersome, redundant and degrading.  Each service provider requires the completion of its own application and requires submission of many of the same documents to verify income, housing, and family status. My proposal is for the creation of a common application to streamline the process for providing and receiving assistance. This common application would either be sent to multiple agencies for determining eligibility or a new agency could be created to focus on determining financial eligibility and connecting people to programs they financially qualify for.

    I support the creation of a new agency for determining eligibility as a cost saving measure. The new agency would take the burden of determining eligibility off of our health and human service providers allowing them to focus on providing services instead of collecting paperwork for determining eligibility.

     The common application would create a one-stop application process for receiving benefits. It would be similar to a FAFSA application that college students complete to determine eligibility for student financial aid and the common application form used for applying to multiple colleges. This new common application would determine financial eligibility for services.

     This common eligibility application would expedite the receipt of services. People will automatically receive the MassHealth benefits and SNAP benefits they are financially eligible for and automatically put people on waiting lists for housing or emergency services.

**2.  Strategies: For Proposal I and II:** I would organize a letter-writing campaign amongst my constituents and others who are passionate about the issue, encouraging them to write and call the Speaker and House leadership to ensure that their voice is heard.

    I would offer and request to provide testimony at any and all committee hearings and would encourage any committee that would be supportive to hold a public hearing on the issue.

    I would also actively reach out to colleagues, within the Democratic caucus and across the aisle, identifying those who would be receptive and supportive.  I would identify influential senior members that would be open to working with me to support any proposals before the House, using their knowledge and understanding of the legislative process to help build a broad coalition around the issue.

     Even more though, I would reach out to and work side-by-side with the communities in my district, particularly the Housing and Sheltering Committee in Amherst.  I would work with them toward creating and implementing innovative programs and pursuing grants to aid in the funding.  Together we would work to make Amherst a hub of innovation in addressing social issues, making Amherst a model for the rest of the state to follow.

     I recognize that the legislative process does, and was intended to, take time.  However, the role of a state representative is not just to go to Boston, take a vote, then come home - the role of a state representative is to foster community engagement and to be a proactive leader in helping the communities of the Commonwealth to address important challenges like homelessness.

**For Proposal I**: I would work to gain the support of William Galvin, Secretary of the Commonwealth, by meeting with him and the Massachusetts Registers and Assistant Registers of Deeds Association to present my proposal and benefits of raising the deed recording fee. The Secretary of State oversees our Public Records Division, which includes the Registry of Deeds. I already have strong connections with many of the Registers of Deeds through my work as a land title examiner, from my advocacy work assisting homeowners facing illegal foreclosures, and from my leadership role on the Democratic State Committee.

**Vira Douagmany Cage**

Vote for me so I can put my background to work ending homelessness by helping to pass progressive bills at the State House that address health, housing, education, employment, poverty, wage and income inequality and wealth disparities!

     I have a bachelor's degree in Sociology from UMass Amherst. I spent a semester in Washington DC volunteering at the **Community for Creative Non-Violence**, a 1350-bed shelter.  I supervised the women’s wing.  In Boston, I worked for **Project Hope** in the area of **workforce development**.  I was the education coordinator and launched career exploration workshops and overnight weekend retreats for women who were staying in family shelter or living in transitional housing, some who experienced domestic violence.

    As a former **American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts** staff member, I believe all people have the right to be in public spaces, have rights to privacy, and private property, and the right to receive medical care, no matter what their housing situation.  That’s why I support **H. Bill 1129, An Act to Establish a Homeless Bill of Rights** which will provide some guidance for communities to prevent civil liberties discrimination against people experiencing homelessness.

I am proud to belong in a community like Amherst where we take care of our neighbors. I support the goals of the **Amherst Affordable Housing Trust** and will support bills which will provide tax credits and grants to help with creating and preserving affordable housing units.

     We need a living wage for all workers and strong unions to fight for working families.

I support the **Fair Share Amendment** to bring in much needed revenue to adequately fund public higher education to make it affordable, accessible and tuition free for in-state students.

**Endorsed by Mass Care**, I will support legislation to create a single payer health care system for Massachusetts.  Passing such a legislation will free up more money to spend on human potential.

Count on me to support the **Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless** legislative priorities including bills to expand homeless prevention programs such as Residential Assistance for Families in Transition; increase funding for housing and services for unaccompanied youth; maintain Transitional Assistance to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC) benefits for families with disabilities.

    Together, with our collective action, and my voice on Beacon Hill, we can end homelessness and create strong and healthy communities.  Please visit my website: [www.voteforvira.com](http://www.voteforvira.com/)!  Thank you!

**Sarah la Cour**

**1. Proposals:**There are many factors that contribute to homelessness including mental health and addiction issues, job loss, and lack of affordable housing.  Transitional services and supports that provide a holistic approach to this problem are critical for individuals and families who are homeless.  From working on this issue at a local level in downtown Amherst, it has been my experience that there is not a centralized agency or organization that oversees programs and services for the homeless.

    As a legislator, I would propose that the Commonwealth bring all services and programs that effect homelessness under one umbrella initiative. This would include representatives from all relevant departments and programs including, but not limited to, MA Department of Housing and Community Development, MA Department of Mental Health, and MA Department of Career Services as well as state and local non-profits and Local Housing Authorities.

    In addition to providing this centralized service agency for homeless individuals and families, we have to provide the funding to build more affordable housing stock.  This housing stock should take a variety of forms including units within developments that have on-site supervision for transitional residents as well as low-income affordable units that are available through the MA Rental Voucher Program and other rental assistance programs.

**2.  Strategies.** The most important thing that a new State Representative can do when they get to Boston is relationship building.  Meeting and talking with all their fellow legislators in both the House and Senate to establish the basis for coalition building in the future.  Team work is the best chance for getting ideas to gain traction and get bills passed.   Finding common ground and creating innovative solutions.  The success of my public career has been based on patience, good humor, being a team player and a commitment to problem solving.