

Massachusetts Policy and Budget Recommendations to Prevent and End Homelessness in Western Massachusetts November 16, 2018

Preventing and ending homelessness requires a multi-faceted response that addresses the consequences of living in poverty. Below is a partial and still-evolving list of priorities for Fiscal Year 2020 (FY20) that demonstrate the inter-relationship across multiple issue areas, all of which have a direct impact on our Commonwealth's capacity to end homelessness. A coordinated approach is both possible and critical to lasting solutions.

Housing

In Massachusetts, only 46 affordable housing units exist for every 100 extremely low-income people. In FY18, Massachusetts spent an average of \$3,134 in prevention dollars through the RAFT program to ensure continued housing for 4,205 families. During that same time period, Massachusetts spent an average of \$42,845 for each household that entered the state's family shelter program.

Action Steps:

- **Increase funding for rental assistance, including the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP) and the Alternative Housing Voucher Program (AHVP, vouchers for disabled, non-elderly people)** to create more affordable housing and to make vouchers more usable by increasing fair market rents. Right now, MRVP rents are capped at the 2005 fair market rents (unless a waiver is granted). For 2005, the FMR for a 2-bedroom apartment in Springfield was \$772/month and for Pittsfield/Lenox was \$654. In contrast, the current 2019 FMRS are \$1,061 and \$1,048 respectively.
- **Increase prevention resources. RAFT and Tenancy Preservation Project** are two examples of critical prevention resources that preserve tenancies and prevent homelessness. More specific funding proposals for FY20 are in process.
- **Support public housing authorities** with adequate operating subsidies so they can continue to provide quality affordable housing in each community.
- **Reform state zoning and permitting laws that will foster affordable housing growth.** Last session, the Governor introduced his Housing Choice legislation that would have made it easier for cities and towns to adopt certain pro-growth zoning practices. The Great Neighborhoods Campaign supported the Housing Choice proposal with additional zoning provisions. Action this session is imperative to address the housing crisis.
- **Extend HomeBASE beyond one year for families still experiencing housing instability.** This question of automatic renewals is one currently under

consideration. It goes to the challenge of short-term subsidies abruptly terminating without consideration for a family's circumstance. This extension also would better enable domestic violence shelters to utilize this resource to re-house families who are ready to leave shelter.

- **Support additional housing programs, including the Unaccompanied Youth Homelessness Program, New Lease and Home and Healthy for Good.** Stay tuned for proposed strategies in FY20 on these vital housing programs.

Early Education and Care

Right now in Massachusetts, **19,555 children are on the wait list statewide for a child care slot** through the Department of Early Education and Care, including **2,464 in Western Massachusetts alone**. Children who have experienced homelessness are two to three times more likely to suffer developmental delays due to the trauma of homelessness. An array of high quality case management and family support services are necessary to address the social, emotional and physical health needs of children.

Action Steps:

- **Increase the reimbursement rate for early educators.** The industry remains in crisis with an insufficient supply of highly qualified teachers because the pay scale is just barely a living wage (30 per cent of the educators access government subsidies). Classrooms remain closed across the state due to the lack of teachers. The total statewide number of 5,000 early educators is down from 11,000 five years ago.
- **Provide immediate access to childcare upon families entering shelter.** *“An Act Providing Immediate Child Care Assistance to Homeless Families”* had unprecedented support last year and will be filed again this year. This resource will provide critical stability to both the child and parent, decreasing the traumatic effects of homelessness and increasing the capacity to become re-housed quickly.
- **Support Horizons Playspace Funding** request during the budget process. This funding supports the only child-centric program within the Massachusetts shelter program.

Employment

The MassHire Career Centers provide a full range of employment and training services to both job seekers and employers. Priority of service is given to Veterans, low-income people, especially those receiving public assistance, the homeless, people with disabilities, and English language learners. Hampden County Career Centers alone served 1,254 customers experiencing homelessness in the past 12 months.

The Northampton Career Center serving Hampshire County closed last year due to budget cuts primarily on the federal level, although state funding has also declined relative to inflation.

The Secure Jobs Initiative is a statewide employment program that provides workforce development services for families experiencing homelessness. Since the program's start in Hampden County in FY15, 612 heads of household have been placed in employment. Combined housing and employment support to meet family-specific barriers is a proven model for ending homelessness and creating greater housing stability.

Action Step:

Increase State funding for Career Centers to ensure base line facility, staffing, and core programs and increase Secure Jobs funding to cover the entire Western region.

Education

Massachusetts' adult education system (ABE/ESOL) served approximately 18,900 adults in FY17. However, another **roughly 19,000 adults are on waiting lists**; 460,000 adults in the Bay State lack a high school credential and nearly 530,000 have limited English proficiency.

While the Legislature increased funding by 10% in FY19, even taking this increase into account, after adjusting for inflation, the level of resources the Commonwealth provides for adult education has fallen 24 percent since FY 2001.

Action Step:

Continue the Legislature's progress in restoring funding for adult education and ESOL to prevent returns to homelessness.

Mental Health/Substance Use Treatment

Mental health issues and substance addiction are two of the leading social determinants of homelessness. The MA Bureau of Substance Addiction Services (BSAS) is supporting a new program, Enhanced Co-Occurring Residential Recovery Services, which will provide integrated care to individuals suffering from mental health and substance use disorders. Our region's providers are launching 4 of these new programs in the coming months, including a respite (residential) component for those in need of intensive treatment before becoming permanently housed. This program offers the promise of lasting stability for those who have cycled in and out of homelessness.

Action Steps:

- Increase the "nightly bed rate" for individual shelters in Western MA (some of which have far lower bed rates than Eastern MA) to account for the additional resources needed to serve individuals with complex needs, including those in need of Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT).
- Support the continued funding of BSAS programs that address the complex needs facing people with mental health and substance use disorders.

Transportation

Access to public transportation is essential to access employment, education and services in our rural and urban region. The majority of the rural communities in Western MA have little or no public transportation, adding to isolation and creating a significant barrier to education and employment and ultimately increasing the chance of homelessness.

Last year alone, the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority suffered \$700,000 worth of service cuts, mostly in Hampshire County. Berkshire County Transit Authority lost \$232,000 and Franklin County Transit Authority experienced \$25,000 worth of services cuts, all of which resulted in the elimination of evening routes and Saturday service and a reduction in the frequency of many fixed routes.

Action Step:

Increase funding for Regional Transit Authorities (RTAs) and alternative on-demand transportation. The FY19 budget called for the formation of a Task Force on Regional Transit Authority Performance and Funding. Be on the lookout for this Task Force's recommendations that will play a role in FY20 budget decisions.

Food Insecurity

In Western Massachusetts, approximately 223,000 people access the emergency food system each year. Many people who struggle with food insecurity have jobs but are still not able to make ends meet. They are often forced to make anguishing choices between eating or paying the rent, putting food on the table or paying for heat, buying groceries or putting gas in the car to get to work.

Action Steps:

- **Address the "Cliff Effect"** that occurs when people suffer a reduction in public benefits as a result of employment, causing a decline in their overall income. Legislation to create a "glide path" instead of a cliff will be filed again this year.
- **Create a common application portal to allow income-eligible households to apply for multiple needs-based benefits at the same time.** Currently in Massachusetts, 793,000 people receive MassHealth and are likely eligible for SNAP but are not enrolled. A common application would allow individuals the option to apply at the same time for these benefits and a host of other housing, childcare and related resources.

For more information:

Pamela Schwartz, Director

Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness

pschwartz@westernmasshousingfirst.com

413-219-5658