

Western MA COVID-19 Task Force on Housing First Meeting Notes - 9/8/20

In attendance: Senator Jo Comerford, Rep. Natalie Blais, Rep. Dan Carey, Rep. Mindy Domb, Rep. Farley-Bouvier, Rep. Lindsay Sabadosa, Rep. Aaron Vega, Danielle Allard, office of Senator Hinds, Lisa Fletcher-Udel, Office of Rep. Farley-Bouvier, Caitlyn Tourneau, Office of Senator Velis, Gerry McCafferty, City of Springfield/Hampden County Continuum of Care, Alicia Zoeller, City of Holyoke, Alan Wolf, City of Northampton, Wayne Feiden City of Northampton, Mary Beth Ogulewicz, Town of Amherst, MJ Adams, City of Greenfield, Justine Dodd, City of Pittsfield, Emily English, Gandara Center, Jeff Harness, Cooley Dickinson Hospital, Keith Fairey, Way Finders, Leslie Garcia, Springfield Youth Action Board, Brad Gordon, Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority, Clare Higgins, Community Action Pioneer Valley, Kathy Keeser, Louison House, Kevin Noonan, Craig's Doors, Keleigh Pereira, Three County Continuum of Care, Jay Sacchetti, ServiceNet, Pamela Schwartz, Network, Kelly Turley, MA Coalition for the Homeless

Community Updates:

Springfield: concerned about shelter capacity with Taylor Street shelter closed (slated to reopen in mid-October) and social distancing requirements at Friends of the Homeless. Seeing an uptick in the number of unsheltered people. Implementing new strategy with ESG-funded partnership between Catholic Charities and Mercy Medical Center - placing unsheltered people in hotels and housing them from there (with rapid rehousing ESG funds).

Holyoke: in process of convening groups to create a shelter plan. Mayor's office has committed \$200-\$250,000 in CARES Act funds to support a shelter; the challenge continues to be identifying a provider willing to hold the effort (presumably in collaboration with other providers). Staying tuned for the next meeting to be convened.

Northampton: City and ServiceNet meeting to make plans for winter. Will repeat a version of the emergency COVID shelter set up in the Spring at the high school but this time in search of a site (still sorting out the prospect of school re-opening during the winter season). Seeing a major uptick in encampments around the city, notable increase in people living on street; also fears being expressed by residents around people on street not wearing masks downtown, figuring out how to navigate the challenge with compassion alongside public health imperative. Currently Grove Street and Cot shelter are full (25 people); the negative COVID test process is working more smoothly.

Amherst - Craig's Doors is going to contract with DHCD to lease 20 hotel rooms for winter months. Baptist Church (former site for Craig's Doors) deemed too small by the Church to continue to be used as a shelter site so looking for additional space. Meanwhile supporting people in encampments, shower installed outside Resource Center.

Greenfield: City and ServiceNet working together; Wells Street shelter undergoing renovation of 2nd floor space to increase capacity. The Salvation Army will NOT be able to run a Warming Center this season. Seeing a steep increase in encampments in the downtown area.

Pittsfield: The City granted a special permit to approve relocating the shelter to the downtown area. Now in search of a site with various conversations underway. Some downtown business resistance. Also seeing a big increase in encampments.

North Adams - Seeing an increase in emergency housing need calls, people are not interested in going to Pittsfield. Limited capacity here.

Discussion of reasons for increased encampments: closure of formerly public places (e.g., libraries, cafes) has made homelessness more visible; doubling up and couch surfing is less of an option due to COVID; in Holyoke, some displacement of homeless people who used vacant buildings occurring as a by-product of downtown development; overall consensus that it is not necessarily more people who are experiencing homelessness but more people who are being SEEN.

Regional response: agreed to pursue expanded FEMA authorization to pay (75%) for hotel costs to shelter COVID-negative people living on streets. This is a successful strategy in neighboring states (VT, CT) and across the country. MEMA has been resistant to asking for this expanded use despite previous statewide advocacy (by the Network and legislators on this call as well as statewide) and we will revisit this with our statewide partners and consider organizing a municipal letter as part of the push. Thus far, the state has only used FEMA to pay for hotel sheltering of COVID-positive people (and just closed the Northampton site due to lack of occupancy - now only hotel in state for this purpose is located in Worcester). Pamela will connect with other advocates and circle back on next steps.

Other State Advocacy: Pamela reported on the movement of the Right to Counsel Pilot Program bill that is now in Senate Ways and Means and is gaining a lot of traction - see the [municipal letter](#) (signed by our local leaders) and the [health care letter](#) (signed by our local health providers) urging Gov. Baker to allocate \$6 million from CARES Act funding for this pilot. Right now 80% of landlords have lawyers; 7% of tenants are represented and housing courts are anticipating over 20,000 eviction filings when the moratorium ends. Thanks to our region's legislators who are out front on this and please stay tuned for any next steps that we can take as a region to move this forward.

We agreed to meet again in 2 weeks: Sept. 22, 9 am. Pamela will send a Zoom calendar invite.