

Western MA COVID-19 Task Force Meeting Minutes - 9/22/20

In attendance: Representative Natalie Blais, Representative Dan Carey, Representative Mindy Domb, Representative Lindsay Sabadosa, Pat Duffy, Aide to Representative Aaron Vega (and soon to be Rep.-Elect), A.J. Enchill, Aide to Senator Adam Hinds, Lisa Fletcher-Udel, Aide to Representative Farley-Bouvier, Aide to Jen Metsch, Aide to Senator Lesser, Caitlyn LeTourneau, Aide to Senator Velis, Northampton Mayor David Narkewicz, and Alan Wolf, Merridith O'Leary and Wayne Feiden, City of Northampton, Michael Bloomberg, City of Holyoke, MJ Adams, City of Greenfield, Justine Dodds, City of Pittsfield, Gerry McCafferty, City of Springfield/Hampden Continuum of Care, Mary Beth Ogulewicz, Town of Amherst, Erin Forbush, ServiceNet, Jeffrey Harness, Cooley Dickinson Hospital, Clare Higgins, Community Action Pioneer Valley, Leslie Garcia, Springfield Youth Action Board, Rick Hart, Hampshire County Friends of the Homeless, Kathy Keeser, Louison House Northern Berkshire, Michele LaFleur, Three County Continuum of Care, Bill Miller, Friends of the Homeless/CSO, Kevin Noonan, Craig's Doors, Pamela Schwartz, Network, Kelly Turley, MA Coalition for the Homeless,

Community Updates:

Springfield/Hampden CoC: Gerry McCafferty reported that the City of Springfield has allocated roughly \$3.5 million in ESG funds, much of which is going into use of hotels for people living on the streets. Catholic Charities is running the program and has also received state ESG funding to support this effort across Hampden County. Currently, there are 50 people in hotels. They are working closely with Mercy Medical Center (their street outreach and behavioral health workers) and Friends of the Homeless. The goal is to provide both immediate safety and have this shelter serve as a launching point for rehousing.

Friends of the Homeless/CSO (Springfield): Bill Miller reported that the number of people requesting shelter continues to be high. They are looking to expand their capacity and have a promising lead on a site, which they hope to open by Nov. 1. Working on diversion and rehousing (with support from the City's ESG funds).

Holyoke: Chief of Staff to Mayor Morse Michael Bloomberg reported that Mayor Morse has committed a portion of its CARES Act funding to setting up a shelter and the goal is to have it set up before winter sets in (SOON). They are also considering allocating some of the funds to hiring a staff person designated to address housing/shelter issues since currently there is none. As of now the City is planning on issuing an RFP for standing up a shelter. Aware that the timeline is very short and the community is in need of a short-term emergency shelter while it works towards a longer-term shelter plan.

Northampton: Mayor David Narkewicz reported that the City is actively planning for expanded winter shelter, currently looking for locations from hotel space to city buildings. Schools are not an option because they are occupied. Investigating FEMA allowance to use CARES Act funds for non-congregate shelter (hotels). Seeing the same uptick in numbers of people on streets; Board of Health is working with its COVID-19 Ambassadors to provide access to masks and hand sanitizers.

ServiceNet (Northampton): Erin Forbush reported that the two shelters - Grove St and Cot St - continue to be full with a wait list. Working with the City on winter plans.

Amherst: Kevin Noonan of Craig's Doors reported that they are close to signing a contract with a motel for 20 rooms; still looking for a congregate site - their former site at Baptist Church is not available for more than 6 women (due to social distancing requirements) and they are looking for a site that can shelter 16.

Greenfield: MJ Adams of the City of Greenfield reported that they are working to expand Wells St. shelter to add 20 people to its 2nd floor, funded with CARES Act dollars. Hoping to be ready by Dec. 1st. Right now sheltering 20, at capacity, and there is a wait list of 20-25 people. The Warming Center at the Salvation Army is not available this year. Currently facing challenges of people finding shelter in parks and parking garages. Some people who were not able to comply with shelter rules are now living out, creating the next layer of challenge.

Pittsfield: Erin Forbush of Servicenet reported that Barton's Crossing shelter is at capacity. Talks are ongoing with the City of Pittsfield about an alternative (and larger) site, with intensive search underway. People are taking up shelter elsewhere in Pittsfield and in one park in particular. This has always been an issue but in this year it's far more visible. ServiceNet is doing outreach in the park and working on sheltering and housing some of these people.

North Adams: Kathy Keeser of Louison House reported that people are coming in from the woods as the weather is getting colder. Same challenge persists of not enough housing and few alternatives.

DHCD/FEMA reimbursement update:

Pamela and Gerry had a conversation with DHCD and DHCD confirmed that it would only seek FEMA reimbursement for providers that had state ESG contracts for hotels (in our region: Catholic Charities and Craig's Doors). It would be doing so under the CURRENT FEMA authorization based on the allowance to shelter asymptomatic people who are at high risk who cannot otherwise live safely. DHCD's goal is to use FEMA reimbursement funds to support rehousing efforts.

Holyoke discussed its needs to set up a shelter - technical assistance available from DHCD? Marketing help to possible providers, guidance on how to set up a shelter, etc. Please contact Michael Bloomberg at bloombergm@holyokey.org.

The group discussed the need for **DHCD to play a greater role in coordinating a response to this challenge** of street homelessness.

Federal Waiver on CARES Act expenditures: we discussed the federal requirement to spend down all CARES Act funds by the end of the year (as distinct from ESG funding which has 2 years). We need to push for a waiver so we can make the best use of these funds. Pamela will reach out statewide to learn about any advocacy on this extension and will reach out to our US Congresspeople and our state legislators for their support.

We discussed the issue of the **Baker Administration's transparency around its CARES Act funds** - what are they spending on - and the importance of ensuring these urgent community needs around homelessness get the appropriate attention. Pamela noted the advocacy around Right to Counsel in Evictions and the Act to Guarantee Housing Stability as two statewide pushes for funding allocations that will have a massive impact on preventing additional homelessness.

The group discussed if/where the role of state legislator advocacy lies around these issues. Possibilities include:

- joining us in the push for a federal waiver on CARES Act spending;
- pushing the Baker Administration for greater transparency around its CARES Act spending;
- pushing for increased targeted spending to directly meet the challenge of sheltering each person living on the street (one idea raised: each community make its calculation of what it would cost to shelter its population living on the street and make that collective ask).

**The group agreed to meet next on:
Thursday, October 8, 9 am**
stay tuned for Zoom link