

Western MA COVID-19 Task Force for Housing First
Meeting Minutes - 10/8/20

In Attendance: Raekwon Wheeler, Office of U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren, State Rep. Natalie Blais, State Rep. Dan Carey, State Rep. Lindsay Sabadosa, State Rep. Aaron Vega, State Rep.-Elect Pat Duffy, Ari Morton, Office of State Rep. Lindsay Sabadosa, Lisa Fletcher-Udel, Office of State Rep. Tricia Farley-Bouvier, Jennifer Metsch, Office of State Senator Eric Lesser, Katie O'Leary, Office of State Rep. Mindy Domb, Caitlyn LeTourneau, Office of State Sen. John Velis, North Adams Mayor Tom Bernard, Northampton Mayor David Narkewicz, West Springfield Mayor William Reichelt, MJ Adams, City of Greenfield, Leanne Cloutier, City of Westfield, Justine Dodds, City of Pittsfield, Gerry McCafferty, City of Springfield/Hampden County Continuum of Care, Peter Miller, City of Westfield, Merridith O'Leary, City of Northampton, Allison Duddleston, ServiceNet, Gina Govoni, Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority, Erin Forbush, ServiceNet, Rick Hart, Hampshire County Friends of the Homeless, Kathy Keeser, Louison House, Kevin Noonan, Craig's Doors, Keith Rhone, Friends of the Homeless/CSO, Keleigh Pereira, Three County Continuum of Care, Jay Sacchetti, ServiceNet, Pamela Schwartz, Network, Joyce Tavon, Mass. Housing and Shelter Alliance, Liz Whynott, Tapestry Health

Network Updates:

Congressional advocacy to extend CARES Act expenditure deadline of 12/30/20: Pamela followed up on the last meeting's discussion regarding the problematic CARES Act funding expenditure deadline of 12/30/20. She talked with staff at both Senator Markey and Senator Warren's offices. While an extension is not likely right now - given the precarious on and off again negotiations re: additional funding - it is also an issue they are acutely aware of and will continue to advocate for over the next couple of months (the basic theme: a lot can happen in the next 2 months). They will relay our region's urgency to Senators. Pamela is talking with Rep. Neal's office on Friday (note after conversation: same message delivered and received). We will stay in touch.

DHCD seeking FEMA reimbursement for shelter costs: Pamela reported that DHCD is holding webinars this week and next to advise shelter providers on the process for submitting requests for FEMA reimbursement for their emergency shelter costs. DHCD will (and must) submit on the providers' behalf. While this will not provide immediate resources, it is a positive step forward for maximizing federal dollars towards additional rehousing and shelter resources in the future. They will be relying on their current (as opposed to expanded) FEMA authorization that provides coverage to individuals at "high risk" of contracting COVID-19 (defining "high risk" to include people experiencing homelessness).

Community Updates

Springfield: Catholic Charities is using its Emergency Solution Grant (ESG) funding from DHCD to place people living on the street straight into hotels - started in late July and now about 90 people in 4 hotels. The City is hosting a multi-agency meeting twice a month to create housing plans for every person. Some are already re-housed. It's a great effort with tremendous collaboration. As a result, the large number of unsheltered people on the streets has leveled

off. (Pamela's note: This is an exciting example of a national best practice being put to the test here in our region.)

Friends of the Homeless: plans are underway to expand capacity at an additional site - roughly 40 beds - hoping to open in November. Right now at current site operating above contracted capacity (130 beds) with social distancing to meet the demand.

Northampton - Shelter planning team is continuing to work on logistics for its expanded winter shelter. Working to get clear on access to FEMA funds and use of CARES Act funding. The City has set up additional support for people living outside - "ambassadors" in Pulaski Park, creation of a mask free zone so people living outside can have a place to be mask-free, more hand sanitizing stations, etc.

Grove Street/Cot Shelter: Continuing to shelter in 2 different locations, up to 26 people.

Jay Levy: seeing excess of 50 people outside in Northampton and Amherst - people less hidden

Amherst: Unitarian Universalist Society voted unanimously to allow emergency shelter at their site. Working now with code enforcement to determine exact numbers (between 14-16). In continuing conversations with the Hampshire Hospitality Group about the leasing of 20 units at an Amherst motel.

Note: Jay Levy noted the count of roughly 50 people living outside between Northampton and Amherst. It is not necessarily an increase since COVID-19; it is more a matter of increased visibility due to the closure of indoor spaces (e.g., libraries).

Greenfield: The 2nd floor of the current Wells St Shelter is being renovated to expand capacity (possibly 10 additional beds) which will hopefully be open by mid-November, bringing their total shelter bed capacity to 30-35 beds. This renovation is made possible by a donor contribution.

Pittsfield: ServiceNet will be returning to its expanded space at St. Joe's High School (no longer in use as a school), the same site it used at the start of COVID-19. This is a great development as it will allow for all shelter operations to be located in 1 site and has capacity for roughly 50 people.

North Adams: Noted knowledge of at least 20 unsheltered people in North Berkshire who have nowhere to go - Pittsfield is not considered an option for them because it is not where they live. Working on options but finding it extremely difficult so far.

Discussion of MEMA hotel resources for isolation and quarantine:

The group discussed the two-fold challenge:

(1) There is only one MEMA hotel available in the state and it is located in Everett and it is only available for people who have tested positive (not for people who have been exposed). It was noted that MEMA will provide transportation to individuals from here who need to get there, and there is a referral to case management services. But the distance is still a meaningful barrier.

(2) There is NO MEMA hotel for individuals who have been exposed to the virus and need to be in quarantine. This is a serious gap for the region. Rep. Sabadosa noted that we need to be prepared for the response that our "numbers aren't high enough." Suggested we have a proposed plan for MEMA to adopt to strengthen our advocacy. It was also noted that MEMA should be advised that current landlords of shelter space (e.g., Unitarian Society in Amherst) will not offer such space without assurances that quarantine space is available for people who have been exposed. Pamela will raise this issue with her DHCD contacts and will also raise it on the statewide bi-weekly call DHCD hosts with shelter providers.

Meeting Schedule: It was noted that towns have conflicting standing meetings on various days across the week so we will alternate between Tuesdays and Thursdays. Our next meeting will be:

Tuesday, October 20, 9 am-10 am
(Note: Pamela sent calendar invite)