

Western MA COVID-19 Task Force for Housing First - Meeting Minutes 11/5/20

In attendance: Senator Jo Comerford, Senator Adam Hinds, Representative Dan Carey, Representative Paul Mark, Representative Lindsay Sabadosa, Representative Aaron Vega, Representative-Elect Pat Duffy, Lisa Fletcher-Udel, Office of Representative Tricia Farley-Bouvier, Jennifer Metsch, Office of Senator Eric Lesser, Katie O'Leary, Office of Representative Mindy Domb, Katie Verra, Office of Senator John Velis, Mayor Tom Bernard, City of North Adams, Mayor David Narkewicz, City of Northampton, Keith Benoit, City of Northampton, Wayne Feiden, City of Northampton, Merridith O'Leary, City of Northampton, Alan Wolf, City of Northampton, MJ Adams, City of Greenfield, Justine Dodd, City of Pittsfield, Erin Forbush, ServiceNet, Brad Gordon, Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority, Gina Govoni, Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority, Jeff Harness, Cooley Dickinson Hospital, Rick Hart, Hampshire County Friends of the Homeless, Clare Higgins, Community Action Pioneer Valley, John Hornik, Amherst Affordable Housing Trust, Kathy Keeser, Louison House, Jay Levy, Eliot CHS-Homeless Services, Brooke Murphy, Three County Continuum of Care, Kevin Noonan, Craig's Doors, Mary Beth Ogulewicz, Town of Amherst, Phil Ringwood, DIAL/SELF, Pamela Schwartz, WMNEH, Joyce Tavon, Mass. Housing and Shelter Alliance, Kelly Turley, MA Coalition for the Homeless, Rose Webster-Smith, Springfield No One Leaves, Liz Whynott, Tapestry, Katie Allan Zobel, Community Foundation of Western MA

Community Updates:

North Adams: Mayor Bernard reported that there are continuing conversations about the best way forward to meet the emergency shelter need - due to limited time and capacity, this is likely to be the stop-gap solution of motel rooms - in contact with DHCD about funding potential

Pittsfield: ServiceNet reported that on Nov. 1 the expanded site at former St. Joe's High School opened. Can serve up to 50 people. Barton's Crossing shelter residents moved there. Encampments continue in moving locations around the city. Jay Levy of Eliot CHS-Homeless Services noted that there are more people sleeping outside than there are beds (rough count of 30). Some refuse shelter due to other issues; unclear when limited capacity will be the issue. Housing people directly from the street is also happening.

Greenfield: ServiceNet reported that expansion of its Wells St. site is underway and will add 15 more beds, bringing the total capacity to 35 beds. Encampments also exist in Greenfield - MJ reported that one is receiving scrutiny from the Health Dept. due to sanitation conditions. Work continues to provide housing both from the street and from shelter. The City has made contingency plans during this renovation period for the Salvation Army to cover the cost of motel rooms if freezing temperatures require it.

Northampton: Mayor Narkewicz reported out on the outcome of the mayor/town manager letter to the Command Center proposing the use of the Northampton Quality Inn for the dual purpose of Isolation and Quarantine (I&A) space and Northampton's emergency winter shelter space. MEMA said no to this combination, rejecting the use of hotels for regular emergency shelter in general. They are willing to offer support to set up a congregate site. The City is working with ServiceNet, Northampton's shelter provider, in reviewing a possible site at a church.

On the matter of an I&Q hotel in the region, MEMA said it was "looking into it" and meanwhile assured all that transportation to the one site in Everett was readily available (contrary to our local experience here) and that when the need arose they would respond to it. There was consensus that this is not acceptable and that mayors/town managers would seek a group meeting with the Command Center. Two major points: (1) it is not acceptable to "wait for the crisis" to have a response, that is too late; and (2) the fact that I&Q is so distant will bear on people's willingness to get tested (a requirement in shelters) if they fear the only response is to travel 200 miles from home. This will in turn keep people out of shelters and less safe. Pamela will follow-up with the municipal leaders about next steps.

On current Northampton shelter, ServiceNet reported that shelters are full with a waiting list.

Amherst: Winter shelter opened 11/1, both at the Unitarian Society (14 beds) and at the University Lodge (20 rooms). A smooth start.

Holyoke: Rory Casey was unable to attend but provided an update via email: We're still on track to get a shelter on-line. We had a setback on site selection but have identified some new locations. Red Cross and MEMA are going to come out to conduct an evaluation. We're having a follow-up meeting with the state today at noon to firm up our plans. Will keep posted.

Springfield - Shelter capacity is close to pre-COVID numbers - Friends of the Homeless is opening a second site. Catholic Charities is continuing to operate hotel rooms for people living on the street - over Aug and Sept. had roughly 100 people in hotels. Since the Rescue Mission reopened the demand for hotel rooms has decreased. There is not a big street presence at this point. Rehousing out of hotels is happening. Hotel rooms have brought people into shelter that would have otherwise refused congregate space.

Youth and Young Adults: Phil Ringwood of DIAL/SELF reported that they are not seeing a big demand for emergency shelter at this point; they have standing agreements with hotels in Hampshire and Franklin Counties to provide emergency shelter when needed.

Discussion of post-eviction moratorium: Rose Webster-Smith of Springfield No One Leaves shared some Hampden County data on evictions post the lifting of the moratorium including: 90 Motions for Executions being filed, 120 Notices to Quit issued by the Sheriff in the first 2 days following the end of the moratorium; foreclosure auctions happening across Western MA. There was discussion about the Governor's Eviction Diversion Initiative (EDI), which most immediately provides additional RAFT resources to prevent eviction. However, the regional housing authorities reported an overwhelming number of applications and lack of capacity to meet the demand. It was also reported that people are experiencing a multi-day delay when calling the State's 211 help number. And non-payment of rent due to COVID-19 is not a defense to being evicted.

Legislators expressed a desire to get more informed (a request to please call their offices directly with any ongoing challenges). Discussed the possibility of holding a legislative briefing for legislators so they can learn more directly about the eviction crisis in our communities and the resources available and the gaps that need to be closed to maximize their utility.

The Guaranteed Housing Stability Bill is one option for addressing the crisis that statewide that many legislators support. Re-drafting is happening now to integrate EDI (maximizing its resource) and conversations are continuing between statewide advocates and legislators. One possibility raised is whether there are short-term measures that can be attached to the budget. Pamela will keep the group informed as the advocacy continues.

Next meeting date: Tuesday, November 17, 9 am.