

Western MA COVID-19 Task Force for Housing First Meeting Minutes - 1/26/21

In attendance: Senator Jo Comerford, Representative Pat Duffy, Representative Tricia Farley-Bouvier, Representative Jake Oliveira, Representative Lindsay Sabadosa, Danielle Allard, Office of Senator Adam Gomez, Juan Anderson-Burgos, Office of Rep. Pat Duffy, Kevin Chambers, Office of Senator Velis, Lisa Fletcher-Udel, Office of Rep. Farley-Bouvier, Caitlyn Letourneau, Office of Senator Velis, Jennifer Metsch, Office of Senator Lesser, Morinsola Tinubu, Office of Rep. Farley-Bouvier, Katie Verra, Office of Senator Velis, Kelly O'Reilly, Office of Representative Dan Carey, Northampton Mayor David Narkewicz, Pittsfield Mayor Linda Tyer, Town Manager Mike Sullivan, South Hadley, MJ Adams, City of Greenfield, Justine Dodds, City of Pittsfield, Emma Dragon, Town of Amherst, Wayne Feiden, City of Northampton, Kathleen Lingenberg, City of Chicopee, Gerry McCafferty, City of Springfield, Peter Miller, City of Westfield, Mary Beth Ogulewicz, Town of Amherst, Merridith O'Leary, City of Northampton, Alan Wolf, City of Northampton, Alicia Zoeller, City of Holyoke, Paul Belsito, Irene and George Davis Foundation, Kathryn Buckley-Brawner, Catholic Charities, Keith Fairey, Way Finders, Erin Forbush, ServiceNet, Tom Guerino, Greenfield Housing Authority, John Hornik, Amherst Municipal Affordable Housing Trust, Kathy Keeser, Louison House, Jay Levy, Eliot Services, Kevin Noonan, Craig's Doors, Keith Rhone, Friends of the Homeless/CSO, Jay Sacchetti, ServiceNet, Kelly Turley, MA Coalition for the Homeless, Joyce Tavon, MHSA, Amanda Watson, Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority, Rose Webster-Smith, Springfield No One Leaves, Liz Whynott, Tapestry, Kate Allan Zobel, Community Foundation of Western MA

Federal policy updates:

IMPORTANT changes in federal policy:

- FEMA is now authorizing 100% reimbursement for all congregate and non-congregate shelter (i.e., hotels) through September 30, freeing up DHCD to contract with providers to meet all shelter needs in our communities through that date. The previous end date was April 30, so this extension is also great news for our communities. We will await further clarification on when this reimbursement policy will take effect but presumably it will not be retroactive.
- President Biden extended the CDC eviction moratorium until September 30. This is also good news, although advocacy remains around the moratorium itself as it is not nearly as comprehensive as it needs to be to provide the protection tenants require (it only kicks in upon issuance of the execution and a tenant must sign under the pains and penalties of perjury).
- President Biden included an additional \$30 billion in rental assistance funds in his COVID-19 relief package. There is ongoing advocacy around the \$25 billion that was allocated in Congress' latest legislation to ensure that regulations around its distribution are not as restrictive as the previous administration proposed.

Community Updates:

Springfield: City and Catholic Charities: There is currently sufficient capacity between the shelter expansion and use of hotels. Re-housing efforts are continuing with slow and steady success. On vaccinations, working with DPH to get guests vaccinated; all staff vaccinated.

Holyoke: City: CDBG funding is now available with applications due 2/2 (all interested providers welcome to apply). The initially identified congregate shelter site did not work out. The Mayor is realigning staff and work is continuing to identify a site. CHD: hotel has capacity of 45, currently 43 guests; seeing slight slow-down in referrals, have not had to turn anyone away.

Northampton: ServiceNet: emergency shelter not at full capacity; all guests and staff have been vaccinated (a shout-out by ServiceNet and the Mayor to Merridith O'Leary of the Northampton Board of Health for their work); the BOH has also created a system with the support of Dr. Bossie of Health Care for the Homeless to vaccinate shelter guests after arrival.

Concern raised regarding Cooley Dickinson releasing people who are COVID positive - necessitating a search for this person. Agreed there is a gap in use of MEMA's isolation and quarantine hotel (unless the individual is refusing it?). More to learn and Pamela will reach out to Jeff Harness of CDH and follow-up with Merridith.

Amherst: Craig's Doors: one positive COVID case in the shelter - isolated and contained. All else is smooth - had to refer two people to Holyoke hotels, which worked well. Vaccinations underway, with thanks to Amherst Health Department.

Greenfield: ServiceNet: not at full capacity right now but have used motel when necessary; expanded space at Wells St is likely to be open by end of week. On vaccinations, figuring out transportation to UMass for vaccinations. The City advised that vaccination clinics are available at the Senior Center, very close to the shelter. Daytime warming center is up and running smoothly.

Pittsfield: ServiceNet: a positive case at St. Joe's shelter, isolated and contained and quarantine ends tomorrow. Capacity at about 25 people. Had to turn 4 people away during the quarantine period. Vaccinations are going well for staff and guests, thanks to City support. A warming shelter will open soon in collaboration with the Christian Center and ServiceNet.

North Adams: Louison House: at full capacity for transition housing; hotel rooms also full (St. Joe's quarantine put extra pressure on the demand). With quarantine ending tomorrow, people will be transported again to Pittsfield. Vaccinations happening for staff and guests through local clinic. Kathy is in touch with DHCD around potential need for more hotel rooms.

Evictions Update

Thanks to Rose Webster-Smith of Springfield No One Leaves and Homes for All MA with this data report:

Since lifting of the moratorium:

1,212 total eviction cases filed in Western MA. This number includes non-payment cases only.

The county breakdown is as follows:

Hampshire - 79

Franklin - 59

Berkshire - 148

Hampden - 873, Springfield, 542

The Trial Court issued its first report on eviction data for the month of December - please see [here](#) and attached. One glaring data point: in the month of December, .9% of tenants had legal representation as compared to 71% of landlords. Also of note: 449 executions for possession were issued statewide, even with the federal moratorium in place. Homes for All MA Coalition is currently drafting legislation to better address this eviction crisis.

RAFT Update:

Way Finders (Hampden/Hampshire Counties) reported receiving roughly 400+ applications each week. DHCD has issued new policies to help simplify the program which should speed up application times, in addition to bringing on new staff (both at Way Finders and at DHCD), expecting to see the benefits of these changes in the next 2-3 weeks. Right now there is an average wait time of 6-8 weeks to process an application (which is expedited as needed to protect the tenancy). The biggest challenge is incomplete applications (close to half missing complete data).

Franklin County Regional Housing Authority: 30-40 applications/week; have hired additional staff; roughly 4-1/2 weeks to process an application at this time. Encourages use of the "landlord door" to obtain rental assistance.

Berkshire Housing Development Corporation could not attend this morning but Brad Gordon of Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority stressed the urgency of increasing speed of processing applications to preserve tenancies.

Greater Springfield Housing Study: Keith Fairey of Way Finders previewed the imminent release of this housing study that will cover Hampden, Hampshire and Franklin Counties, a collaborative regional project with the UMass Donahue Institute producing the analysis. The report will have 2 phases, the first phase an examination of housing needs and challenges in the region. It will start by looking at pre-pandemic demographic numbers to establish a benchmark against which we can measure our progress (similar to annual Boston reports), analyzing the housing supply gap, and cost burden. The second phase will dive deeper into issues related to housing segregation, COVID-19 impacts and housing conditions and productions. Stay tuned for the release shortly. Senator Comerford echoed the importance of this study to set a baseline for us to advocate to meet our needs in Western MA.

Shelter assistance in documenting address for public benefit applications: Representative Sabadosa raised the issue of constituents needing to document an address to obtain unemployment benefits; that the failure to verify an address can mean months' delay and even clawbacks of benefits received. She asked that we create a quick resource sheet to know who to call in shelters to obtain this information when needed for a constituent. Pamela will follow-up.

Next meeting date: Thursday, Feb. 18, 9 am