

Family Services Committee Meeting Minutes - 2/9/21

In attendance: Barbara Agosto, New England Farm Workers Council, Catherine Baum, Community Legal Aid, Lynneanne Brown Elizabeth Freeman Center, Sophie Chambers, Community Legal Aid, Hillary Cronin, VA Homeless Program, Brenda Garcia, BHN Fit Program, Joscelyn González, New North Citizens Council, Lynn Guertin, Ware Family Resource Center, Danielle Hartner, CHD, Jessica King, Valley Opportunity Council, Cheryl LaChance, Way Finders, Fran Lemay, ServiceNet - Greenfield Family Inn, Jane Lindfors, DTA/DV unit, Donna Nadeau, DHCD, Theresa Nicholson, Center for Human Development, Monique Osbourne, YWCA of Western MA, Stacy Parsons, North Berkshire School Housing Partnership/DESE McKinney Vento Regional Liaison Brett Rogers, Head Start, Jasmin Rojas, Way Finders, Linda Roy, BHN Family Resource Center, Jessica Sastre, New England Farm Workers Council, Pamela Schwartz, Network, Bryan Torres, Community Legal Aid, Janette Vigo, Way Finders, Melissa White, Valley Opportunity Council

Data Review and Discussion

Click [here](#) for the EA data for the month of January, 2021. Pamela will work on creating a comparative analysis over months for some of the relevant data points.

Discussion:

The reduction in the number of families in shelter (for CHD normally 263, now 193, at 75% capacity, for example; similar reduction for other shelter providers) is a function of a few things: DHCD is not referring families to congregate shelter or co-shelter for covid safety reasons; and shelter providers are setting aside units for potential covid needs. At the same time, due to covid, there is less diversion happening because people are not leaving their apartments if they can manage to avoid it. More families are presenting with an emergency need for shelter and therefore going into shelter and not able to be diverted.

RAFT Update: Way Finders reported roughly 415 applications on average each week; hired significant number of new staff to assist with the load; in January alone WF spent \$2.5 million on rental assistance as compared to last January spending of \$210,000. Last week alone, WF served 377 households totaling \$914,000. The changes in RAFT guidelines have allowed for a more efficient system. Statewide goal is to process applications within 3 weeks and progress continues to get there.

There was discussion of families' eligibility for RAFT if receiving HomeBASE. State policy changed to "decouple" the two so that there is not currently a maximum combined benefit limit between HomeBASE and RAFT. The Regional Administering Agency (RAA) no longer needs to factor prior HomeBASE payments into a RAFT benefit determination. However, families currently in their 12-month HomeBASE benefit period are only eligible for RAFT if they are experiencing an eligible housing crisis and if their full HomeBASE benefit has already been expended. Households may not be actively receiving funds from HomeBASE and RAFT at the same time (i.e. RAFT cannot pay a monthly stipend on top of a HomeBASE monthly stipend).

Please contact Janette at Way Finders with any questions at jvigo@wayfinders.org.

Vaccination update: Shelters are seeing some resistance in taking the vaccine. CHD reported 20% of staff and 24% of guests are saying yes. VOC initially saw a lot of "no's" but that is changing over time. It's helping to put out continual information to both staff and guests several times a week.

State and Federal Policy Updates: Pamela provided state and federal policy updates that are captured in these blog posts on the Governor's recently proposed FY22 budget [here](#) and [here](#), President Biden's COVID-19 funding package as it relates to housing [here](#) and new information on the COVID Eviction Legal Help Project [here](#). Be sure to [subscribe to the Network blog](#) to stay connected to policy developments and advocacy alerts.

Announcements:

Safe Step referrals for flex funds:

Way Finders has funds available on a limited basis for anyone experiencing domestic violence who is also experiencing a financial crisis due to COVID-19. Once Safe Step receives the referral they screen for basic eligibility and schedule a phone screen with the applicant and/or referral source. Releases of information are helpful to receive from the referring agency along with the referral in order to make the process as efficient as possible. Referrals can be sent to the staff at either address: scloutier@wayfinders.com; cnavarro@wayfinders.com. [Click here](#) for referral form.

Openings for remote services at Holyoke Chicopee Springfield Head Start! Call 413-417-7779 or go to hcsheadstart.org .

Next meeting date: Tues, March 9, 11 am - 12 noon