

Western MA COVID-19 Task Force Meeting Minutes - 2/18/21

In attendance: Rep. Natalie Blais, Rep. Dan Carey, Danielle Allard, Rep. Jake Oliveira, Office of Senator Gomez, Juan Anderson-Burgos, Office of Rep. Pat Duffy, Kevin Chambers, Office of Senator John Velis, Lisa Fletcher-Udel, Office of Rep. Tricia Farley-Bouvier, Jennifer Metsch, Office of Senator Eric Lesser, Anthony Moore, Office of Senator Gomez, Ari Morton, Office of Rep. Sabadosa, Katie O'Leary, Office of Rep. Mindy Domb, Mayor Tom Bernard, North Adams, Mayor David Narkewicz, Northampton, MJ Adams, City of Greenfield, Justine Dodds, City of Pittsfield, Kathleen Lingenberg, City of Chicopee, Peter Miller, City of Westfield, Mary Beth Ogulewicz, Town of Amherst, Alan Wolf, City of Northampton, Alicia Zoeller, City of Holyoke, Kathryn Buckley-Brawner, Catholic Charities, Jane Edmonstone, Community Legal Aid, Erin Forbush, ServiceNet, Rick Hart, Friends of Hampshire County Homeless, Jeff Harness, Cooley Dickinson Hospital, Kathy Keeser, Louison House, Kevin Nooan, Craig's Doors, Keleigh Pereira, Three County CoC, Keith Rhone, CSO/Friends of the Homeless, Phil Ringwood, DIAL/SELF, Pamela Schwartz, Network, Theresa Nicholson, CHD, Joyce Tavon, Mass Housing and Shelter Alliance, Kelly Turley, MA Coalition for the Homeless, Amanda Watson, FCRHRA, Rose Webster-Smith, Springfield No One Leaves

Community Updates:

North Adams (Louison House) - at capacity with hotel rooms; expanding by 4 rooms - 2 for young adults (via youth funding), 2 via DHCD. Vaccinations going smoothly.

Pittsfield (ServiceNet) - still plenty of capacity (census at roughly 30 with capacity for 50); the Warming Center - collaboration between ServiceNet and the Christian Center - is opening imminently and will be open, Monday-Friday, 9 am - 3 pm

Greenfield (ServiceNet) - currently full at Wells Street shelter; 7 people in hotels; small wait list but those individuals are with family or friends. Warming center is open 7 days/week, 5 hours/day - great local collaborative effort. All staff and guests have been offered vaccines although initially a low acceptance rate, continuing to promote and educate.

Northampton (ServiceNet) - very close to capacity at First Churches (yesterday census 27 with capacity for 30); Grove St is full. There is overflow capacity of 5 beds at First Churches if necessary, which is used occasionally. Manna Soup Kitchen has opened a Warming Center - current census of about 6 people.

Amherst (Craig's Doors) - just expanded with 19 additional rooms at the Econo-Lodge in Hadley, funded through end of May. Temporarily closed the UU until hiring more staff (but people from UU moved to hotel - a net gain of 5 beds, and safer in non-congregate setting). But once hired up, will have 53 beds offered through Craig's Doors (20 at University motel, 19 in Hadley, 14 at UU).

Holyoke (Center for Human Development) - hotel is at capacity with 42-45 people (depending on number in household), 2 people on wait list. A great partnership with the community, especially the police dept. and narcotics unit. Continuing to house people. Challenges include

lack of detox beds - once people are ready for treatment, delay is very tough. Scheduled to close 4/30.

Holyoke (City): continuing to search for a congregate site. CDGB funding RFP went out and despite targeted outreach, there was not a proposal to provide homelessness services. The City requested \$65,000 to provide homelessness support, possibly with a staff person, still unclear. The Drop-In Center operated with the Police Dept. touched 73 individuals since July 1 - this is an opportunity for referrals to detox and other services.

Springfield (Friends of the Homeless) - capacity ok - enough room to respond to need, serving more women; testing guests every week, no positive results; vaccine offered to all
Springfield (Catholic Charities) - sheltering 120 at hotels, number fluctuates somewhat based on weather; served over 200 people total since program began, permanently housed 30. Offering vaccines - thus far roughly 30% are accepting. Continuing to promote.

Discussion re: FEMA reimbursement of 100% of shelter costs. Can that allow for extension of hotels beyond end of April? It was noted that FEMA does not cover case management or rehousing work. It was also noted that the state provided \$9 million in supplemental funding this year for emergency shelter crisis and now that FEMA is available for hard shelter costs, this money could be allocated to the rehousing/case management efforts. More to learn and discuss and possibly advocate on this.

Point in Time Counts - Each CoC's annual PIT counts were conducted on 1/27 (and for the 2 weeks following). In terms of unsheltered people:
Northampton, Amherst, Hadley - 11 people
Greenfield - 11 people
Pittsfield - 4 people, Northern Berkshires - 2
Hampden County - 27 total (breakdown to come)

Overall these numbers are significantly lower than last year (in Hampden County, the drop was from 104 to 27!). This drop can largely be attributed to the addition of hotel rooms as an emergency response.

Eviction Update (Springfield No One Leaves, thanks to Rose Webster-Smith):

Eviction filings since the lifting of the moratorium on 10/17/20:

Hampden 1122

Springfield 718

Franklin 67

Berkshires 183

Pittsfield 103

Hampshire 103

Trial Court issued [2nd data report on evictions](#) (per state law passed in Dec., 2020):
Combining January 2021 and December 2020 numbers:

- 485 defaults - this means the tenants do not appear for their court case - unclear what the barrier is - technology, language? Not showing puts tenants on the path to eviction.
- 833 executions for possession - the last stage where sheriff can serve (at landlord's request) and provide 48 hours to vacate)
- the report states only 3 court continuances were provided based on RAFT application pending but Jane Edmonstone of Community Legal Aid pointed out that this is incomplete reporting and the continuance provision has been a vital piece for slowing down evictions
- the report states only 2.3% of tenants have representation as compared to 77.5% of landlords. This percentage is also considered an undercount. But by how much?

New Legislation on deck

The bill filing deadline is Friday, Feb. 19. A partial list of key legislation to address the housing and homelessness crisis includes:

- [An Act to prevent COVID-19 evictions and foreclosures and promote an equitable housing recovery](#) This bill will build on the protections adopted in Chapter 257 (as part of the FY21 budget) and create greater protections for both tenants and homeowners.
- The MA Coalition for the Homeless' priority bills - see the summary [here](#). We are also invited to join in their Legislative Action Day - [learn more here](#).
- While there was not time to discuss at the meeting, Senator Comerford has filed Local Option Transfer Fee Legislation for Affordable Housing ([SD 565](#)) which will give local communities the option to implement a real estate transfer fee on high-cost real estate sales to raise revenue for affordable housing development.
- Also not discussed but a key priority: [Right to Counsel in Evictions](#)

The Network is hosting meetings with the Western MA delegation in a few weeks, on a county-basis, to discuss both FY22 budget priorities and legislative priorities.

RAFT Updates:

- **Franklin County (Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority):** Amanda Watson reported good progress on speed of application process, getting to a 3 week turn-around time. 178 applications are in the pipeline, approving roughly 17 per week and receiving roughly 15 per week.
- **Berkshire County (Berkshire Housing Development Corporation):** via email from Elton Ogden: processing going more smoothly - recent DHCD policy changes on application requirements is making a significant difference - approving roughly 36 applications/week; a total of 643 households have applied for funds; have helped 170 households with RAFT; have another 224 households who have applied and are in process
- **Hampden/Hampshire County (Way Finders):** via Janette Vigo's report-out at a previous Network meeting: roughly 415 applications each week; in one week served 377 households totaling \$914,000. Regulation changes are allowing for more efficient processing.

Next meeting date: Tuesday, March 9, 9 am - 10 am