

Western MA COVID-19 Task Force for Housing First Meeting Minutes - 4/1/21

In attendance: Juan Anderson-Burgos, Office of Rep. Pat Duffy, Paul Belsito, Davis Foundation, Keith Benoit, City of Northampton, Kevin Chambers, Office of Senator John Velis, Senator Jo Comerford, Corinne Coryat, Office of Rep. Natalie Blais, Rep. Mindy Domb, Keith Fairey, Way Finders, Wayne Feiden, City of Northamptonm Lisa Fletcher-Udel, Office of Rep. Tricia Farley-Bouvier, Erin Forbush, ServiceNet, Rick Hart, Friends of Hampshire County Homeless Individuals, Gina Govoni, Franklin County Regional Housing Authority, Tom Guerino, Greenfield Housing Authority, Clare Higgins, Community Action Pioneer Valley, Kathy Keeser, Louison House, Jay Levy, Eliot Services, Kathleen Lingenberg, City of Chicopee, Rep. Paul Mark, Gerry McCafferty, City of Springfield/Hampden CoC, Jennifer Metsch, Office of Senator Eric Lesser, Anthony Moore, Office of Senator Adam Gomez, Brooke Murphy, Three County CoC, Mary Beth Ogulewicz, Town of Amherst, Katie O'Leary, Office of Rep. Mindy Domb, Kelly O'Reilly, Office of Rep. Dan Carey, Mayor David Narkewicz, City of Northampton, Kevin Noonan, Craig's Doors, Rep. Kelly Pease, Ali Reza-Reyes, Office of Senator Adam Gomez, Keith Rhone, Friends of the Homeless/CSO, Phil Ringwood, DIAL/SELF, Matthew Rogers, Springfield Housing Authority, Jay Sacchetti, ServiceNet, Rep. Lindsay Sabadosa, Pamela Schwartz, WMNEH, Joyce Tavon, Mass Housing and Shelter Alliance, Kelly Turley, MA Coalition for the Homeless, Alan Wolf, City of Northampton, Rose Webster-Smith, Springfield No One Leaves/Homes for All MA Coalition

Marking the shift in this Task Force's focus from shelter to housing: Pamela noted the incredible job done during this pandemic by our shelter providers in concert with cities and towns and state support to stand up additional shelter in congregate sites and hotels to keep people safe. With the warming weather, vaccinations and above all the new massive influx of federal housing and homelessness resources from the American Rescue Plan Act, it has been decided to shift the Task Force's focus from shelter needs to offering a vehicle to coordinate around the new opportunities created through the Rescue Plan (and potentially the infrastructure bill, if passed, that includes over \$200 billion in housing dollars).

Gerry McCafferty, Director of the Office of Housing from the City of Springfield and Hampden County Continuum of Care, helped lay the groundwork:

- hotels in Hampden County sheltered roughly 200 people in total and right now there are 117 currently residing in the hotels.
- 40 of these individuals have already been permanently housed out of the hotels and a number of others are in process
- the goal is to ensure the roughly 100 people remaining at hotels exit into housing and not return to shelter
- we learned that non-congregate shelter (hotels) can be key for engaging people who refuse to go into congregate shelter; it affords people access to case-management who have never had such support before (e.g., one veteran who had lived unsheltered for 10 years was just housed)
- we know that the market for affordable housing is extremely competitive and cannot be built quickly so we need to think creatively

- the CoC used federal funds last year to provide payment incentives for landlords who were otherwise wary of accepting people who had been homeless into their housing - this strategy has expanded the number of willing landlords
- the American Rescue Plan Act - thanks to the tremendous national advocacy that has taken place - targets both housing and homelessness, and will provide housing authorities a substantial number of new vouchers and communities substantial dollars they can use to purchase and convert sites into housing (e.g., hotels, other commercial buildings)
- This is a time that calls for innovation and partnerships, and can ultimately result in new housing to house people experiencing homelessness.

Clare Higgins, Executive Director, Community Action Pioneer Valley, and on behalf of Keleigh Pereira, Director, Three County Continuum of Care, offered more groundwork on the challenges amid the federal opportunities:

- the new federal housing vouchers can only be useful if they can actually be used, i.e., can be used with appropriate fair market rent values attached to them (i.e., if the authorized "fair market rent" does not meet the actual market rents, landlords will refuse to accept them). We need to work with our local housing authorities to seek permission from HUD to use the "small area fair market rent" which allows the voucher to meet the prevalent rent levels because it is based on a smaller geographic market area; and we need to urge DHCD to seek the "small area fair market rent" for all of the housing authorities it funds directly. Without this allowance, the effect is to concentrate the use of these vouchers in low-income areas, effectively concentrating poverty in a community. And ultimately, it also leaves people who, despite having vouchers, have nowhere to live.
- We need to address zoning issues to ensure all communities are open to the federal Administration's new resources.
- As we bring housing authorities into this effort, we need the state to partner as well, specifically through providing supportive services for our housing authorities. We cannot make the best use of these new federal resources without adequate case management to support people working to establish housing stability. Adequately funding the state Dept. of Mental Health among other services will be critical. Our state legislators will be important partners in this effort to obtain adequate support.

Discussion (below is a condensed summary the points in group discussion):

- we need to broaden the tent to include employers who have a vested interest in housing stability; let's be sure to find the "unusual suspects" in the efforts to use these new resources
- we need to make our case for Western MA - where we have only 10% of the population but are the second largest rental assistance distributor in the state, i.e., the need here is disproportionate to our population and this calls for unique solutions for our region
- we should consider the possibility of purchasing hotels and offering a continuum of services, from emergency shelter to temporary housing to permanent housing with support services on site

- we must be aware of our one regional housing authority in Franklin County and the need for it - and all smaller housing authorities - to qualify for receipt of federal capital dollars
- noted that the Bureau of Substance Abuse Services (BSAS) is now making funding available on a rolling basis (as opposed to set contract periods) which may positively impact non-profit developers who are interested in building sober housing (with now more readily available access to support services through BSAS)
- lack of case management is embedded in shelter contracts, with too little funding for this service and therefore too little case management; it would make a meaningful difference in the rehousing effort if shelters were better funded to provide highly trained staff to do case management
- the "continuum of services" in one location concept is something that is underway for youth and young adults - it would be great to build on this for all populations
- we need to focus our plan on how to house harder-to-house people who have many barriers; how to give them the support they need; how to help housing authorities become active partners in this effort with the appropriate resources in tow

Eviction crisis update:

Rose Webster-Smith of Springfield No One Leaves and Homes for All MA Coalition reported the following eviction filings based on non-payment of rent since the lifting of the eviction moratorium on October 17, 2020:

Franklin County: 82 eviction filings

Hampshire County: 134 eviction filings

Berkshire County: 218 eviction filings

Hampden County: 1,353 eviction filings; Springfield alone: 855

1,221 executions issued (the court document that allows landlords to ask a sheriff to provide 48 hours to vacate the premises)

85 stays of execution issued

The CDC moratorium is set to expire on June 30 and is under direct challenge in the courts. It also does not stop a landlord from pursuing an eviction.

Foreclosures:

344 properties in danger of foreclosure in Western MA
768 defaults

Rental Assistance Update:

- Way Finders (Hampden/Hampshire Counties): Federal resources are now available with no dollar cap (state cap is \$10,000) - must all be spent within 15 months. Applications are down a little, to 40-50 applications/day; applications are being processed within 30 days.
- Franklin County Regional Housing (Franklin County): DHCD's simplifying of the application requirements has helped a lot with the flow. The amount of arrears sought is frequently notably low, sometimes in the hundreds of dollars to stave off eviction.

Pamela is noting here the **Network's Save the Date for it's Annual Gathering on Friday, June 4 at 10 am**. Please see [the flyer here](#) or attached. And [please register here](#).

Representative Kelly Pease raised **an important question at the end of our meeting on how tenants are being evicted in the face of available state and federal rental assistance**. Due to lack of time, we were not able to discuss this question as a group but I am providing the answer provided to him below, fyi.

- Less than 10% of tenants have lawyers when faced with eviction (while close to 80% of landlords have lawyers). They are frequently unaware of the process, their rights, or the resources available to them (despite ongoing outreach and information - the gaps are still significant); the default rate - tenants not showing for their court date due to unfamiliarity with the process - was 20-25% pre-pandemic; now with zoom being the only way in and many low-income tenants having only their phones to rely on the default rate is presumed to be much higher. This is a significant reason why tenants are still being evicted while resources are available.
- Some landlords refuse to accept rental assistance, a refusal that is allowable under current law. This refusal allows them to evict their tenants for non-payment of rent.

The **COVID-19 Housing Equity Bill** ([HD3030/SD1802](#)) requires landlords to seek available rental assistance before pursuing eviction. This would ensure that tenants would become aware of the resources available since landlords would be required to seek it prior to eviction. It would also reduce tenant defaults just by virtue of reducing the number of evictions filed.

The goal of this bill is to create housing stability for all, including the landlords, ensuring small landlords get the assistance they need and ensuring tenants are not evicted due to their lack of access to information. The bill also provides foreclosure protection for small landlords, recognizing that landlord housing stability is also critical for tenant stability. This bill takes the housing instability caused by the pandemic out of the courts and ensures it gets addressed through access to resources and protection for those who need it.

Please see [the factsheet](#) for additional detail.

Next meeting date: Tuesday, April 20, 9 am.