



November 12, 2021

Gordon Calkins, Director of Individual Homelessness
100 Cambridge Street
Boston, MA 02114

Dear Gordie:

I am writing on behalf of the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness (“Network”) in response to the MA Department of Housing and Community Development’s (DHCD) Request for Information regarding the procurement of the individual shelter system.

The Network seeks to prevent and end homelessness in Hampden, Hampshire, Franklin and Berkshire Counties with a Housing First approach that centers racial equity. It is made up of hundreds of partners from the western region who together represent virtually every sector of our community.

The recommendations regarding this procurement are based on the cumulative input from the Network’s Individual Services Committee and the Western MA COVID-19 Task Force for Housing First, the former a group of Western MA providers that convene monthly to address issues particular to addressing individual homelessness, the latter a group of state and city and town elected leaders and staff and providers that also convene monthly to discuss local challenges and solutions regarding homelessness.

First, as a backdrop to the recommendations that follow, please see these data points below:

- In Hampden County, the **2020 “Point in Time” count showed there were 104 unsheltered people** living on the street or in places not fit for human habitation. **In 2021, that count dropped to 29 individuals.** People unable to enter congregate shelter due to complex barriers were able to enter a non-congregate site. They stayed safer, and so did our communities.
- Individuals in non-congregate sites also got re-housed much more quickly. According to a Hampden County Continuum of Care analysis, **over a 15 month period, from July 1, 2020 to September 30, 2021, 52% of people residing in non-congregate sites were re-housed as compared to a rate of 16% in congregate sites.** Non-congregate shelter makes rehousing more possible more quickly.
- Western MA historically receives less funding than is proportional to the number of people it shelters. A data analysis by the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance in 2013 showed that 7% of the state’s shelter funds were allocated to Western MA while the region actually sheltered 13% of the state’s total individual homeless population. While available data has been limited since then, the continuing funding formula for the line-item suggests this disproportionality continues. This inequitable distribution of funding should be corrected through this procurement.

The following recommendations reflect the Network's top priorities as explicitly named by its Network partners:

Shelter Model

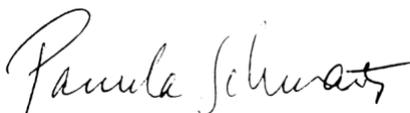
- **Create a combination of non-congregate and congregate shelter** in every community so people who cannot stay in congregate have a place to be sheltered.
- **Ensure all shelters are 24/7, year-round shelters across the region so we are not faced with the inhumanity of putting people outdoors in the winter daytime or outside entirely as of May 1.**
- Enact uniform standards to **ensure a true Housing First model (low barrier shelters)** while also recognizing that shelters cannot be the place of last resort for people with higher-level needs.
- Ensure regional equity in the funding of the statewide shelter system.
- Account for the higher bed rate need for smaller shelters in more rural areas due to fewer beds but similar overhead and case management needs.
- Ensure adequate access to sub-populations, e.g., people who are trans; Spanish speakers (ensure Spanish speakers are on staff).
- Move the system towards smaller, transitional non-congregate sites that could be considered first step transitional housing, while maintaining smaller emergency congregate shelter sites for walk-ins or for people who would struggle for mental health or other reasons to be in a room of their own.

Workforce support

- **Fund training for every staff person on trauma-informed care and harm reduction, non-violent communication, motivational interviewing and racial and ethnic sensitivity.** Skills in these areas are critical to provide an environment of support, not punishment, for shelter guests. This requires intensive and ongoing training for all incoming staff.
- **Fund sufficient support for staff.** The challenge in hiring is made all the greater by the rate of burn-out and lack of systemwide support. We must fund capacity to allow time and space for staff to receive trauma processing and self-care skill-building.
- **Increase pay for staff!** Staff retention is crucial for a successful shelter-to-housing model and the state system should be funded to ensure that a livable wage is paid at all shelters.

We deeply appreciate your work and that of all your colleagues at DHCD. We look forward to continuing the work together to prevent and end homelessness in the western region and across the Commonwealth.

Best,



Pamela Schwartz, Director

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