

## **Family Services Committee Meeting Minutes - 9/13/22**

*In attendance: Melissa Blissett, Square One, Asia Bradford, YWCA, Ellen Broadhurst, forensics social worker, Mayra de Jesus, Shriner's, Shaundell Diaz, Three County CoC, Anthia Elliott, BHN, Erin Forbush, ServiceNet, Brenda Garcia, BHN, Jamie Gaston, MCLA, Lynn Guertin, BHN, Danielle Hartner, CHD, Cheryl LaChance, Way Finders, Jane Lindfors, DTA-DV unit, Terri Lombardo, CHS Head Start, Matt Matonaro, Greenfield Family Inn, Donna Nadeau, DHCD, Carmen Navarro, Care Center, Theresa Nicholson, CHD, Monique Osborne, YWCA, Halima Osman, Stacy Parsons - DESE Liaison/North Adams school liaison, Amarys Perez, Way Finders, Omayara Quinones, Salasin Project, Sara Rivera, New North Citizen Ana Rodriguez, Care Center, Jasmin Rojas, Way Finders, Heather Roy, DTA-DV, Pamela Schwartz, Network, Sarah Slautterback, DESE, Carlton Smith, Way Finders, Jodi Smith, Way Finders, Rachel Trant, DCF, Alicia Walker, Way Finders, Melissa White, VOC*

### **Shelter Updates:**

Most EA shelters - NEFWC, CHD, Way Finders - reported seeing a heavy influx of Haitian refugee families who are being transferred from the eastern part of the state. Many have significant language barriers and no income at all, and are typically in very large families. All immigration appointments are in Boston, requiring transportation. This is a statewide challenge and work is ongoing with DHCD and EOHHS to address this. In general, the pressure on the EA system here is extremely high - all units are full or when a unit becomes vacant it is filled immediately. This is happening alongside chronic understaffing, so that current staff are over-worked and morale is a challenge.

It was reported that DHCD is planning to increase shelter by 200 units, with the plan for them to transition into permanent housing in a year (i.e., go off-line as shelter). DHCD is asking for shelters to report their interest. The big challenge to saying yes is the fact that there are simply no units available.

The YWCA reported that due to lack of housing options, there is less movement out of shelter into housing and guests are having extended stays. This means that people who are no longer at risk of domestic violence must stay sheltered while there is no capacity to admit new people in need of protection. The lack of housing opportunity is a constant barrier to providing services.

### **Issues with Access to EA shelter line:**

The group discussed the challenge of reaching the EA shelter line. The DTA-DV unit has heard from many people who have tried to apply for EA and are on hold for hours with no pick-up or then disconnection. The remote line is not functional. This experience was also reported by other shelter providers and DESE. It was decided that Pamela will reach out to DHCD to share this Network-wide feedback.

### **RAFT update**

Way Finders reported approximately 120 applications/day - close to 600 a week. Electricity and gas shut-offs also continue to be very high - just yesterday 14 people walked into the office with shut-off notices. With the moratorium coming, there is hope this number will drop off. Also seeing people get into payment agreements they cannot afford (and assistance is only available once shut-off has been issued).

For RAFT applicants, as of August 1, they must have a Notice to Quit to pay arrears or a court summons to be eligible. The benefit is up to \$10,000 over a 12 month rolling period. If the arrears are larger than \$10,000, there must be a payment agreement with the landlord. There are currently 2,500 applications pending.

**HomeBASE changes** - this fiscal year the benefit was extended to 2 years and \$20,000 - \$15,000 first year, \$5,000 2nd year - while the increase is a positive, it was noted that the reality is that these funds go very fast with first, last, security, plus furniture. Other new terms: Families have to pay 30% of rent in income; families can't be placed unless they have income; families are able to decline being in HB - will not be terminated from EA for that reason. One unintended consequence is that clients who are struggling don't want to let providers know it - they just say "no" to HB - and then may be more likely to slip through the cracks.

**Secure Jobs/workforce development:** there are flex funds available (e.g., car repair, GED expenses) - people qualify if they receive HomeBase or are in EA shelter. Contact Jasmin Rojas at Way Finders for more information - [jrojas@wayfinders.org](mailto:jrojas@wayfinders.org).

**Voter registration/Fair Share Amendment:** The Network has endorsed the [Fair Share Amendment](#). We discussed engaging shelter providers with voter registration - some interest was expressed in conducting a training. Please stay tuned for more information.

**Network Assistant job posting:** please spread the word! See posting [here](#)

**Next meeting date: Tuesday, October 11, 11 am.**