

Western MA Task Force for Housing First Meeting Minutes - 9/15/22

In attendance: MJ Adams, City of Greenfield, Juan Anderson-Burgos, Office of Rep. Duffy; Keleigh BenEzra, Three County CoC, Keith Benoit, City of Northampton, Tom Bernard, Berkshire United Way, Rep. Natalie Blais, Karen Carmona, Justine Dodds, City of Pittsfield, Rep. Mindy Domb, Sean Donovan, Northampton DHHS/Community Care, Cathi Emery, Rep. Tricia Farley-Bouvier, Lisa Fletcher-Udel, Office of Rep. Farley-Bouvier, Ethan Flaherty, Office of Rep. Pease, Erin Forbush, ServiceNet, Koby Gardener-Levine, Office of Congressman McGovern, Senator Adam Gomez, Brad Gordon, Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority, Gabrielle Hanson, Office of Rep. Mark, Jeff Harness, Cooley Dickinson Hospital, Rick Hart, Hampshire County Friends of the Homeless, Clare Higgins, Community Action Pioneer Valley, Lamari Jackson, Office of Senator Gomez, Denise Jordan, Springfield Housing Authority, Kathy Keeser, Louison House, Reilly Lee, Office of Congressman Neal, Meredith Lewis, Community Foundation of Western MA, Kathleen Lingenberg, City of Chicopee, Tim McCarthy, Craig's Doors, Deb McLaughlin, Franklin County Opioid Task Force, Rachel McMahaon, Office of Rep. Whipps, Gilad Meron, Northampton Resilience Hub, Jen Metsch, Office of Senator Leser, Theresa Nicholson, Center for Human Development, Rep. Jake Oliveira, Rep. Lindsay Sabadosa, Pamela Schwartz, WMNEH, Cherie Spinks, Office of Rep. Puppolo, Lily Stowe-Alekman, Office of Rep. Domb, Kelly Turley, Mass Coalition for the Homeless, Alan Wolf, City of Northampton, Susan Worgaftik, Greening Greenfield

Note: At the start of this meeting, we learned that the City of Northampton received a phone call claiming that buses with 150 immigrants were on their way from Texas to Northampton. A similar call was made to the Town of Amherst. After further investigation, these calls were determined to be a hoax. However, what we learned was how our community - this very Task Force - responded quickly and strongly to the call for assistance. Huge thanks to all who make our region such a special place to live and work..

Shelter Updates

Springfield (Friends of the Homeless/CSO): notable full during spring and summer months, concerning for winter - current capacity is roughly 140 men, 40 women

Holyoke (Center for Human Development): Motel 6 is full as always - 48 units; hoping to have low-threshold housing open by November - will be 46 units.

CHD (thank you, Theresa!) is managing remaining Community Foundation emergency shelter funds that remain from last winter's season - approx. \$5,000) - more discussion below regarding this season's needs.

Amherst (Craig's Doors) - at capacity with 40 at University Motor Lodge and 40 at Knights Inn, - as of 11/1, will transition from Knights Inn to Lutheran Church congregate space

Northampton, Greenfield, Pittsfield (ServiceNet) - all mostly at capacity - 35 in Nton (between two shelters), 30 in Greenfield, 45-50 in Pittsfield.

North Adams (Louison House) - 11 units operating, can have 16 in the winter season; way above usual numbers this summer and early fall with many on the wait list, very concerned for the winter months. Good news: Permanent Supportive Housing has been funded for young adults - in process.

Bottom line: there is not enough shelter capacity to meet this winter's need. The new procurement for shelter - and any related funding - will not be operational until April (when new contracts are due to begin). We must brainstorm solutions outside the current shelter contracts to address this winter's shelter needs.

Discussion re: possibility of Community Foundation funds for this winter:

Before requesting emergency overflow shelter funds from the Community Foundation for this coming winter, the group discussed the challenge of administering the funds. Theresa Nicholson of CHD stepped forward this past season and it became clear to all involved that it is an unsustainable job to do over and above ongoing responsibilities. Fielding calls, making arrangements, connecting with motels, ensuring smooth operations - it is close to if not entirely a full-time job in and of itself. How are we going to make this happen? Is it possible to identify a person to hire (almost the greater challenge than finding the funds to pay for it). We will continue this discussion next month. Please relay any ideas to Pamela in the interim.

Budget updates: Governor Baker proposed a [final FY22 supplemental budget](#) that includes dramatic investments in low-threshold housing (\$20 million), community-based housing for people discharged from psychiatric hospitals (\$50 million) and immigrant and refugee housing (\$20 million). This funding would make a significant impact. Right now we are waiting on legislative leadership to decide whether the Legislature will be called into session to vote on this and/or the economic development bill. This is unclear. But we will stay tuned and be ready to advocate for these provisions.

Prevention/RAFT update:

Pamela relayed via Way Finders that for Hampden/Hampshire Counties, they are seeing 120 applications/day, with a very high number of utility shut-off notices. RAFT eligibility now requires a Notice to Quit or court summons to be eligible. The benefit is up to \$10,000 from \$7,000 but can only be used in one payment and when the arrears are higher than the \$10,000, there must be a landlord payment agreement to issue the benefits.

In Franklin County, they are seeing 25-30 applicants per day, still high for this area. Also noted that people are leaving their apartments when they receive the NTQ, thereby making themselves ineligible for benefits. In Berkshire County, the demand continues to be high as well.

Re: utility assistance, it was noted that the supplemental budget also includes increased funding for fuel assistance. Yet another reason to pass this bill.

Fair Share Amendment

Pamela reported that the Network has endorsed the [Fair Share Amendment](#); the Network will be offering education on this important ballot question (Question 1 of the Nov. 8 ballot) that will support our goal of greater housing stability in the region. Please contact Pamela to talk further about mini-trainings on this issue.

Next meeting date: Thurs., October 20, 9 am