

Family Services Committee Meeting Minutes – May 2, 2023

In Attendance: Alexy Alicea, ICM VOC, Farida Bature, WMNEH, DCF, Melissa Blissett from Square One, Tana Bloom, Franklin County Regional Housing Authority, Maria Chambers, BHN, Zandra Davis VOC, Mayra De Jesus, Shriners Children Erin Forbush, Service Net, Brenda Garcia, BHN/Holyoke Fit Program, Olga Kravchenko, Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity, Dora Lambertus, BHN, Jane Lindfors, DTA DV Unit, Matt Montanaro, Greenfield Family Inn, Maryam Nassir, VOC, Jasmin Rojas, Way Finders, Brett Rogers, HCS Head Start, Heather Roy, DTA DV unit, Xiomara Sanabria, Pamela Schwartz, WMNEH, Jodi Smith, Wayfinders, Rachel Trant, DCF, Natalie Ulrich, Safe Passage, Alicia Walker, Wayfinders, Amarys, Wayfinders,

Shelter Updates:

Overall: the demand on the family shelter system is extremely high across our region and the whole state. A significant increase in refugee families with multiple, complex needs, including language barriers. Every shelter in our area is seeing this – ServiceNet in Greenfield, Valley Opportunity Council in Holyoke/Chicopee, Way Finders in Hampden County, Center for Human Development in Hampden County. Hotels are now the shelter of last resort because the actual congregate shelters are full. Over 100 families in hotels via CHD right now (approx. 500 statewide). DHCD is in emergency mode to address the crisis, supporting providers to expand capacity and working with hotel owners as well. Also working to resolve the issue with local community ordinances that prohibit more than 30 day stays in hotels.

ServiceNet is working with DHCD to expand family shelter in North Adams through use of a dormitory of Mass. College of Liberal Arts (MCLA). This will provide 64 family units. There is some community resistance but it is hopeful that it will be resolved favorably and this shelter will open in the next couple of months.

Additional challenges were noted around DHCD's capacity to transfer families facing a DV situation. Transfers are not happening quickly (or at all) because there is no place to move a family. Recognizing the reality of an overwhelmed system.

DESE update: In the face of this crisis, the number of school children experiencing homelessness has increased beyond last year's with 2 months remaining in the school year. Numbers are growing overnight.

RAFT Update

Way Finders: Number of applicants continue to be at an all-time high. In April, they processed over 2,400 applications, last week had a total of 632 and just yesterday alone 113. Also seeing roughly 15 people a day seeking utility assistance.

Secure Jobs: Way Finders provided a reminder on the Secure Jobs Initiative as a resource. Any individual in Hampden, Hampshire and Franklin Counties who has received RAFT or HomeBASE or in an EA shelter is eligible. SJI has flex funds to assist people with employment barriers as well as case management to support job search and retention.

FY24 House Budget Update:

The MA House of Representatives passed its final budget last week. Positive news includes:

- Chapter 257 eviction protections were made permanent so that a judge cannot issue an execution for eviction while rental assistance is pending.
- Improvements to HomeBASE, the rehousing program for families: the House budget increases the annual benefit from \$20,000 to \$30,000, allowing for renewals up to \$15,000 while housing search is taking place and prevents the cliff effect by protecting the level of benefit while a family's income rises upon employment. Great news!
- RAFT funding was increased to \$181 million.
- MRVP was increased to \$173 million.
- Public Housing was funded at \$102 million
- Shelter workforce assistance at \$10 million.

The Senate Ways and Means Committee will release its FY24 budget in the next week and debate will follow. Please stay connected to the [Network blog](#) for additional updates and action alerts.

Tax Reform Debate: The House passed a tax reform proposal that includes \$441 million in tax breaks that will largely benefit the wealthiest residents and corporations (estate tax reform, cutting the short-term capital gains tax, and a single sales factor tax for large corporations). The Network has not yet had an opportunity to discuss its position (later this week), but it did endorse the Fair Share Amendment and relied on Raise Up Massachusetts' information in doing so. Raise Up has provided information in advance of the Senate debate on this proposal which you can find [here](#).

Network Annual Gathering: Happening soon! We are at capacity but please email Pamela at pschwartz@westernmasshousingfirst.org if you would like to attend in person. Otherwise, please register for the [zoom link here](#).

Next meeting date: June 13, Tuesday at 12pm.