

Western MA Task Force for Housing First Meeting Minutes - July 11, 2023

In attendance: roughly 60 attendees, including legislators, staff, city and town staff and dozens of providers from across the four western counties

Shelter and Housing Updates

Craig's Doors (Amherst): move from University Motor Lodge in Amherst to Econolodge in Hadley has gone smoothly. Guests are very happy there. Congregate site is also going well. Demand is constant, regularly required to turn people away for lack of space.

CSO (Northampton/Greenfield): full to capacity. Greenfield shelter is now fully staffed.

St. Joe's (Pittsfield): preparing to downsize for the new shelter in downtown Pittsfield that will open imminently - it will have 40 beds, which is a reduction in space relative to St. Joe's High School. Starting to plan now for winter capacity.

Louison House (North Adams): transitional housing shelter is full with 16 individuals and 2 families.

Friends of the Homeless/CSO (Springfield): continually full; seeing an increase in people with immigration issues and an increase in pregnant women. Also seeing individuals returning to shelter within the year due to lack of supports. Underscored the urgent need for more permanent supportive housing.

An exchange in the "chat" about successful models for PSH: These links were offered:
<https://www.vpi.org/housing/>
<https://helpfbms.org/permanent-supportive-housing/>

Days Inn (Greenfield): 44 families are now living at the Days Inn. ServiceNet is case managing.

Family Inn (Greenfield): shelter 16 families, constantly full

Family shelter (Pittsfield): expanded beds from 18 to 22. Always full.

The family system is under immense pressure with continually rising numbers of families seeking shelter, many of them refugee families. Kristin Elechko, the Governor's Office Western MA Director, noted that the state has opened 10 command centers statewide to meet families and address urgent needs and provide referrals. She noted that the Boston Medical Center's Emergency Room has roughly 100 families sleeping there every night with no alternative option.

Valley CDC Housing Update: continuing to engage with Hadley Zoning Board around permit to convert Econolodge into affordable housing (grateful it is being used as a shelter in the interim); moving forward on housing development on Crafts Ave in Northampton - 30 affordable studio apartments, aiming for 2025-2026 start date; East Gables in Amherst - almost complete - 28 studio apts - for which there were 500 applications (200 from unhoused individuals). Aiming for move-ins in the next few months.

RAFT update:

Change in policy as of 7/1: benefit level down from \$10,000 total to \$7,000 and no longer able to pay forward on rent ("stipends" are not allowed). For people who applied as of June 30, their applications will be "grandfathered" into the prior rules.

Way Finders (Hampden/Hampshire Counties): demand continues to be high. In June, distributed \$3.35 million for 1,100 households. Received 4,000 calls to rental assistance center, 2,700 people entered their doors for assistance. Roughly 15 walk-ins/day for utility shut-offs.

Now Homeowners Assistance is also available at Way Finders (for Hampden/Hampshire). Berkshire Housing Dev Corp is administering homeowner assistance for Berkshire and Franklin Counties.

Berkshire and Franklin are in the process of closing out FY23 RAFT applications (must be completed by 7/30 in order to qualify under the more generous rules).

Noted the request for extensions for housing search in use of subsidies because there is no housing out there.

See Brad Gordon's recent [Berkshire Eagle letter to editor](#) regarding the imperative for action to address the housing crisis.

Also noted the challenge of reducing eviction prevention resources at a time when the need is so high. HLC (the new DHCD) is trying to make the resources reach as many people as possible; the Network's response (in partnership with statewide advocates) is to increase the state commitment to the point where it does not need to be reduced and the needs are better

FY24 Budget Update: The FY24 budget is still in Conference Committee, working out differences between the House and Senate budgets. The House is being called into session on Thursday so that may mean a Conference budget will be presented. Once the budget is voted on in the Legislature, the Governor will have 10 days to impose any vetoes. It is important for us to stay connected via the blog on any imminent advocacy.

Legislative Update: The Network testified on its priority bills on June 26, including RAFT, HomeBASE and Permanent Supportive Housing. [See the testimony here](#). It is unlikely we'll have hearings to attend in August but will use the blog to keep people informed.

Western MA Housing Coalition Report-Out:

Anni Zhu, Chief of Staff for Way Finders, provided a report on the recent meeting and activities of the Western MA Housing Coalition. The group is focused on preparing for advocacy around the Housing Bond Bill which should be introduced soon (and is the foundation for investments in affordable housing for the next 5 years). The goal is to arrive at clear recommendations for the HLC Secretary and position western MA to advocate strongly for its priorities. Please stay tuned on the final product and action steps on this.

The Coalition is also seeking input regarding updates to the Pioneer Valley Housing Study. Please let it know of any key data or analysis that you'd like the update to include, or any other feedback or ideas that you might have: <https://forms.gle/8B2ENmct2tFQKPVc6>

Next meeting date: Thurs., 9/14, 9 am.