

Western MA Task Force for Housing First Meeting Minutes - 9/14/23

In attendance: 50 attendees, including: Rep. Lindsay Sabadosa and the offices of: Rep. Domb, Rep. Duffy, Rep. Farley-Bouvier, Rep. Gomez, Sen. Mark, Rep. Pease, Rep. Puppolo, Rep. Saunders, Rep. Smola, Sen. Velis, Rep. Whipps, Rep. Williams; and Kristen Elechko, Western MA Governor's office

State Senator Edwards tours Western MA

Senate Chair of the Housing Committee, Senator Lydia Edwards, toured western MA to learn more about the region's housing challenges. Thanks to her hosts: Senator Jo Comerford, Senator Adam Gomez, Senator Paul Mark and Senator John Velis, and to the many Network partners involved. We received reports from Senate staff on each stop - Holyoke, Chester, Great Barrington, Springfield, Hadley and Greenfield. Read more at our [blog post here](#).

Shelter/Housing Updates

Springfield:

CSO - Friends of the Homeless - shelter capacity is full, regularly needing to exceed contracted capacity.

City of Springfield: Gerry McCafferty reported on the response to the growing encampment in Springfield, which includes a collaboration with Mental Health Association and their new 30 low-threshold housing units just coming on line. There is coordinated outreach and referral to this new program to housing many individuals currently living in the encampment. A very exciting model of collaboration. Gerry also noted the hundreds of units in the affordable housing pipeline that are in process. Almost 100 new units will be opening this fall; other projects will create 75 new permanent supportive housing units.

Holyoke: no provider report available but Pamela reported on CHD's Motel 6 and low threshold housing continuing to be at capacity.

Pamela also noted **CHD's 4 county Outreach and Triage Program** which is underway now, almost fully staffed. **To access their services call: 413-867-0398.**

Amherst: *Craig's Doors* reported that shelter sites are at their capacity limit; extensive use of resource center; turn-aways for lack of space continues to grow ; working in partnership on encampment on Amherst/Hadley border, making progress moving some people indoors.

Valley CDC reported on the opening of 28 units of affordable housing (East Gables) with move-ins by the end of September. Valley is also in litigation with the Town of Hadley over a zoning permit to create affordable housing at the Hadley Econo-Lodge.

Northampton: Independent Housing Solutions (IHS) reported on their Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) at 5 Franklin Street, Northampton. All 16 units are full. New elevator is about to be installed. Also working on an expansion project for 6 additional beds for people with acute medical needs.

Valley CDC obtained the permit from the Northampton Planning Board to continue its work on housing development in downtown Northampton for 30 studios, at least 20 designated for people exiting homelessness. Also continuing to work on renovating the Bridge Street nursing home for 60 affordable housing units (10 designed for people exiting homelessness).

Greenfield: *ServiceNet* reported on their use of the Days Inn for family shelter - 45 families sheltered there. Also runs an additional family shelter in Greenfield and one in Pittsfield, sheltering a total of 38 families.

CSO was not able to be present but Pamela reported on Wells Street being full, always full.

Pittsfield:

ServiceNet reported on individual shelter moving into new space in the next weeks. Very worried about winter capacity. Good news on use of Pittsfield Housing Authority vouchers being used to house people who have been homeless.

Northern Berkshires: *Louison House* reported on its 2 shelters, all full if not over capacity. Receiving many calls on families in need of shelter. Very concerned about winter needs - impossible to meet the need at current capacity. Also seeing more youth.

Youth and Young Adult Report (via chat, thanks to Phil Ringwood): Franklin Hampshire County: Effectively full for shelter without access to hotels. Supporting several young adults in cars and tenting situations. Hoping to have some PSH/RRH units coming online in the fall at DIAL/SELF.

Question in chat via Deb McLaughlin, Franklin/N. Quabbin Opioid Task Force:

Is there an opportunity to consider how to request state support to set up temporary shelters to address the extreme shortage of beds/hotels for unhoused individuals across Western MA for the winter? I'm aware staffing can be a challenge, unless the National Guard and the Medical Reserve Corps can be tapped. Like others have reported, Franklin County/North Quabbin have multiple encampments scattered throughout our 30 communities.

Pamela noted that HLC (Housing and Livable Communities, formerly DHCD) is aware of this challenge both in Franklin County and across the state and conversations are happening. It's unclear what can or will be done but we can (and should) keep pushing.

Prevention/RAFT update:

Way Finders reported very high volume on RAFT applications - average 600 applications/week. 2nd highest application volume in the state. 2,500 applications are in the queue, 1400 in process with staff, 1,100 in draft. 15-20 people coming in for help with utility shut-offs.

Berkshire Housing Development Corp. also reported high volume, not as high a % of homeowners as Way Finders; speeding up application processing timeline so now within 30 days.

Franklin Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority: also reported high volume, at capacity for RAFT administrators. Not seeing so many homeowners right now.

Pamela noted recent data that showed eviction filings in western MA are up by 36% as compared to January to August of last year.

FY24 budget and legislative advocacy

Pamela shared [slides](#) from the presentation to Senator Edwards that summarize the legislative priorities for the Network. The Joint Housing Committee is holding a hearing on 9/27 that will include several of these priorities (Access to Counsel, MRVP, RAFT). Pamela also noted the Governor's vetoes of funding for key housing programs (Home and Healthy for Good, HCECs, Foreclosure Prevention and Counseling, Craig's Doors) and thanked the legislators for their support in pushing for overrides and encouraged partners to keep track of our advocacy via the Network blog. [See here for the information](#) and subscribe to the [blog here](#).

Other announcements

Important reports on the under-funding of the homelessness services workforce:

National Alliance report:

<https://endhomelessness.org/resource/new-estimates-suggest-that-4-8-billion-is-needed-to-bring-homeless-services-salaries-into-the-modern-era/>

Homelessness services survey:

<https://www.nhswsurvey.com/>

Please sign up for the western MA Racial Equity Summit sponsored by our western MA partners:

<https://www.westernmasshousingfirst.org/forum/2023/western-ma-racial-equity-summit-october-24/>

Be sure to distribute the Community Health Equity Survey survey so we can get Western MA heard (until October):

<https://www.mass.gov/resource/community-health-equity-initiative>

Next meeting date: Tues., October 17, 9 am