

Western MA Task Force Meeting Minutes - 11/16/23

In attendance: approximately 60 people, including western MA state legislators, legislative aides, city and town staff, shelter and housing providers and more

Family homelessness update

Kelly Turley of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless provided an update on the supplemental budget to fund the family shelter system:

- The House and Senate did not reach agreement on the \$250 million supplemental budget, debating until 1 am this morning. The point of tension was around the question of requiring the Administration to create overflow shelter spaces for families put on the wait list (otherwise eligible for EA). The House version included this; the Senate version did not (opting for more discretion/flexibility for the Administration). Yesterday was the last day of formal session. All votes now take place in informal session, which can be blocked with one dissenting vote. The Senate has expressed confidence that they will get it through conference committee. The next informal session has been scheduled for Monday. See State House News coverage [here](#).
- Meanwhile: as of now a couple dozen families are on the state wait list; this number is expected to grow markedly. Advocates learned from community partners last night that families tried to stay at Logan Airport but were told they could not.
- Spending bills "die" if not passed by the end of the calendar year (this point was clarified and confirmed following the meeting). If this bill is not passed before 12/31, the process will have to start over. Any extensive funding delay could threaten the viability of the shelter system as a whole.
- Senator Velis' amendment in the Senate budget to create a commission to examine the EA system - what is working and what isn't - does NOT include the question of whether to repeal the right to shelter (this was also a point of clarification).
- Right now in western MA, there are roughly 250 families in hotels and every family shelter is at capacity.

Individual homelessness update

Joyce Tavon of Mass. Housing and Shelter Alliance noted that individual homelessness has never been so high. She shared the collaboration among statewide coalitions that resulted in a letter urging the Administration to look at ALL vulnerable populations, including families and individuals, and ensure there is overflow shelter space for all who need it. It was noted that many "families" become "individuals" when they are separated and individual shelters are feeling the pressures of increased demand from the same population.

Pamela shared that the Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness will be allocating \$20,000 of its funding to help support emergency hotel shelter in the region during cold weather events. It is coordinating with all shelter providers in the region (including those with state winter shelter funds) to ensure as much consistency as possible, as well as data tracking on the individuals served.

Shelter providers shared their various expansion efforts to respond to winter weather, including:

- Craig's Doors Amherst - expanding by 4-5 beds at congregate site and aiming for capacity for 30 at the non congregate site
- CSO Greenfield - expanding by 5 beds from Dec. to Feb., looking at warming spaces
- CSO Springfield - always operating over-capacity; will continue to expand as needed
- ServiceNet Berkshires - looking for funding for a warming center; moving to a permanent shelter site with smaller capacity (40 beds instead of the temporary site that has 50 beds - this is a challenge)
- Louison House, Northern Berkshires - relying on faith-based support; expanding shelter sites with a couple of additional cots

There was a general discussion of the demands placed on individual shelters and staff - always "expanding" without adequate funding or support because they are mission-driven to save lives (and there is no legal "right to shelter" for individuals). This current crisis around family homelessness is a crisis that the individual homelessness system has lived with for years all year long. Partners shared their dismay at how this "urgency" around winter temperatures and increased risk happens every year when it is entirely knowable that it will be cold and people will be on the street. The shared frustration was evident, as was the determination to make system change happen.

Legislative Updates

- The Joint Housing Committee convened a hearing earlier this week and heard two Network priority bills: the local option for rent control and the local option for the tenant's right of first refusal (Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act). The Network testified (see [testimony here](#)). Thanks to Derek Silver, Chief of Staff for Senator Gomez, who provided a summary of the advocacy for the rent control bill (Sen. Gomez is a lead sponsor). There was very strong turn-out for at the hearing in support of the bill (and it can continue with the help of Homes for All MA' organizing campaign to submit testimony - [see here](#)).
- The Housing Bond Bill was filed by the Administration last month. This is an extremely significant \$4.1 billion proposal ("The Affordable Homes Act) that would make meaningful progress towards addressing our extreme affordable housing gap. Thanks to Anni Zhu of Way Finders for providing a summary of the work happening with the Western MA Housing Coalition around the bill, including a western-lens analysis and recommendations. The WMHC is convening a legislative briefing on the recommendations on Dec. 8 (with Network support). To see an overview of the bill, go [here](#). Pamela flagged two policy areas that need fixes: the real estate transfer fee for affordable housing was included - good news! - but it set the threshold at \$1 million home sale price, which cancels out its usefulness for western MA. Additionally, eviction record sealing is included, but as written requires the tenant to petition to have their record sealed in all cases. This creates an undue burden on tenants. The legislative process will be an opportunity to address requested amendments. Legislative hearings will be scheduled after the new year.

Next meeting date: Tuesday, December 19, 9 am