

Western MA Task Force for Housing First Minutes - 12/19/23

In attendance: roughly 60 Network partners, including legislators and aides, city and town representatives, shelter and housing providers, statewide partners and advocates

Individual Homelessness updates:

- **HLC has released its RFP of \$6 million** to expand winter shelter capacity. Go here for the application and information: <https://www.commbuys.com/bsi/external/bidDetail.sdo?docId=BD-24-1076-OCDE-HS003-95688&external=true&parentUrl=close>. Bidders conference is tomorrow. ALL interested parties should apply - while certain regions are prioritized, EVERY region is in a good position to receive funds if they have a site and staff capacity to make it happen (acknowledging that both are also in short supply). Let's get these resources to western Mass - please consider applying!
- **Winter Emergency Hotel Shelter Resources:** The Network has compiled a list of points of contact for winter weather emergency hotel resources: <https://www.westernmasshousingfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Winter-Emergency-Hotel-Resources-and-Protocol-WMA-December-2023.pdf>. Franklin and Hampshire County resources are funded by HLC; Hampden and Berkshire are funded by the Western MA Network to End Homelessness (\$10,000 per county to start). Due to limited resources, winter hotel shelter is a referral-only system, i.e., either providers or state legislators and city/town staff should make the initial contact on behalf of a person in need.
- For a **list of emergency shelters** in the region, please go here: <https://www.westernmasshousingfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Western-MA-individual-emergency-shelters-12.18.23.pdf>
- **The Annual Point in Time Count is scheduled for Jan. 31** for both the Hampden and Three County CoC. Please get connected to your CoC to support this important event. This count forms the basis for HUD's report to Congress and ultimately funding allocations to our region.
- Last year's Point in Time Count analysis was just released. See [HUD's press release here](#). The count showed a 12% increase in homelessness from 2022 with a total estimated count of over 650,000 people. It also showed a marked increase in unsheltered individuals.

Eviction update:

Rose Webster-Smith of Springfield No One Leaves reported that eviction filings have exceeded pre-pandemic numbers. Right now, there are 550 active executions issued for people to be moved out of their apartments.

RAFT updates:

Jodi Smith of Way Finders reported that the demand in Hampden and Hampshire Counties continues to be extremely high. 100-120 people are seeking rental assistance each day (700-750 applications/week). On average, 75 homeowners each week are applying for help with their mortgage arrears. 397 households were denied because they have already maxed out on their benefits for the year.

Jane Pixley of Berkshire Housing and Gina Govoni of Franklin Housing reported on the same unprecedented demand in their regions.

Brief discussion on the factors contributing to the rise in homelessness and housing

instability: above all the extreme lack of affordable housing and rising rents post pandemic plus the loss of renter protections post pandemic plus # of households growing while housing has not (pandemic required doubling, tripling up and households are now separating into different units and there is no housing for them to go into - this has been noted in national conversation as an additional factor nationwide).

Springfield Gardens Update:

Katie Talbot of Neighbor to Neighbor reported on the sale of Springfield Gardens to Patriot Properties. 1,400 units that were terribly managed by Springfield Gardens and in terrible condition - after intense organizing by tenants - were sold...to another terrible landlord! Patriot Properties immediately imposed dramatic rent increases - from \$100-\$500 - and the conditions continue to be deplorable (e.g., no heat, leaks, sub-floors). Many tenants have vouchers and are facing these untenable rent increases. Katie urged providers who manage these vouchers to provide support to tenants faced with this situation. Tenants are continuing to organize to push back against this and welcome all levels of support on the municipal and community level.

Housing Updates:

Valley CDC, Hampshire County: Alexis Breiteneicher, Executive Director, reported on the recent victory regarding the Hadley Econolodge: the Hadley Zoning Board had denied Valley CDC the permit to convert the hotel into affordable housing. Valley appealed and they won! Now they can move forward with developing 50 units of permanent supportive housing. Hoping to begin construction in 2025.

Springfield: Gerry McCafferty, Director, Office of Housing, reported on the opening of 96 units of affordable housing at Knox Residences. Springfield is also in the process of developing 279 units of housing, including 91 units of permanent supportive housing.

Craig's Doors, Amherst: Tim McCarthy, Executive Director, reported on Craig's Doors new management of 15 low threshold housing units (taking over the contract formerly managed by Amherst Community Connections).

Housing Bond Bill:

Anni Zhu of Way Finders reported on the Western MA Housing Coalition's hosting of a legislative briefing to share its recommendations around the housing bond bill (also called the Affordable Homes Act). See the [full report here](#) and the [summary recommendations here](#). This bill offers an extraordinary investment in more affordable housing and in funding to support public housing. It also offers substantial policy recommendations. With thanks to the Western MA Housing Coalition, our region has coalesced around specific recommendations to improve the bill to make it more responsive to western MA needs. For example, the transfer fee for affordable housing as currently written requires a minimum of \$1 million home sale for it to be

applied, thereby canceling out western MA's ability to use it (the Coalition proposes adopting Sen. Comerford's bill provision which allows for using the threshold of the county median home sale price when the median is below \$750,000). The eviction record sealing provision as written in the bill requires tenants to petition the judge to seal the record in all cases, creating a serious barrier for tenants. The WMHC urges amendments to this as well.

Senator Comerford and Representative Gonzalez are circulating a western MA delegation sign-on letter urging the Housing Committee to adopt the recommendations of the WMHC. Stay tuned for legislative hearing dates - likely mid-January. Let's show up for this bill!!

Family homelessness update:

Kelly Turley of Mass Coalition for the Homeless shared an update: the supplemental budget that was recently passed included \$250 million for emergency assistance shelter for families, with a requirement for an overflow site. It also including reporting requirements by the state, the first of which was released yesterday and can be found here: <https://mahomeless.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/12.18.2023-EA-Report-Packet-Final.pdf>. The report states that 3,500 out of 7,500 families are estimated to be migrants, refugees or asylum seekers (but there are questions regarding the basis for that determination). As of last Friday, 306 families were on the wait list to access shelter (although that number was not included in the report). That number is estimated to increase into the thousands over the coming months. The Administration is estimating another \$224 million will be needed to get through the fiscal year (possibly to be drawn from state's transitional funds). The Coalition will be providing more updates and analysis on the recent report very soon. If any questions, please contact Kelly at kelly@mahomeless.org.

The state is running two overflow sites right now: one at Nazarene College and one in Revere (for medical assessments).

United Way is continuing to provide funding for "safety net" sites: application here: <https://unitedwaymassbay.org/impact/crisis-response/shelter-grant>

Veterans Update:

Veterans Health Care for the Homeless produced [this brochure](#) on its outreach and support services. For additional data on the population being served in this region, please see this brief [powerpoint presentation](#) (initially offered at the Network's Veterans Services Committee meeting, fyi).

Fair Housing Alliance of MA (FHAM) on voucher discrimination:

Maureen St. Cyr, Executive Director of the Mass. Fair Housing Center, and Rosa Tobin, Communications Associate, presented on The Fair Housing Alliance of Massachusetts (FHAM), a collaboration of the four Massachusetts fair housing agencies -- Massachusetts Fair Housing Center (MFHC), Community Legal Aid (CLA), Suffolk University's Housing Discrimination Testing Project, and SouthCoast Fair Housing Center. Between our organizations, we offer

advice and representation to individuals facing voucher discrimination across the entire state. To do an intake, someone should call our centralized hotline at 508-444-9332 or [apply online](#). More information and resources are available on the FHAM website: <https://www.mafham.org/>.

Additionally, for all areas of housing discrimination (e.g., disability; sex--including DV, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual harassment; race; familial status and/or lead paint, etc.), if someone resides in Worcester, Hampden, Hampshire, Franklin, or Berkshire County, they can contact MFHC to do an intake by phone at 413-539-9796 or online at <https://www.massfairhousing.org/get-help>.

WMNEH Legislator Meetings to discuss FY25 budget priorities and legislative priorities: Pamela announced that the Network is planning its meetings with the western MA legislative delegation on a county basis (Hampden, 2/2, 9:30 am; Hampshire, 2/2, 12 noon; Berkshire, 2/9, 9:30 am; Franklin, 2/12, 10 am). We look forward to this opportunity for Network partners and their legislators to discuss the most pressing needs for FY25 and for the end of the Legislative Session.

Next meeting date: Thursday, January 18, 9 am