

Family Services Committee Meeting Minutes - 1/16/24

In attendance: Kevin Atkinson, BHN, Melissa Blissett, Square One, Maria Chambers, BHN, Tamicha Colon, Alianza, Ellen Broadhurst, Mayre De Jesus, Shriners Hospital, Jen Dieringer, CLA, Anthia Elliot, BHN DV shelter - Ware; Brenda Garcia, BHN, Erin Forbush, ServiceNet, Marcella Gonzalez, Alianza, Erin Hartwiger, Elizabeth Freeman Center, , Michelle La Fleur, Three County CoC, Nicky LaValley, Way Finders, Donna Nadeau, EOHL, Theresa Nicholson, CHD, Stacy Parsons, Northern Berkshire Jasmin Rojas, Way Finders, Pamela Schwartz, WMNEH, Carlton Smith, Way Finders, Maureen St. Cyr, MA Fair Housing Center, Rosa Tobin, MA Fair Housing Center, Rachel Trant, DCF, Jen Utley, DCF, Janette Vigo, Way Finders, Melissa White, VOC

Family shelters update:

ServiceNet

Greenfield - 16 families at Family Inn; 45 at Days Inn

Pittsfield - 24 families

Looking at possible expansion - will keep us posted as that develops

CHD

276 families in housing units, approx 120 families in motels

had a partial roof collapse at Clarion Hotel - about 35 families impacted - moving families either into EA family shelter or located at another hotel

utilizing MRVP vouchers for long-stayers (65 families); housed 20 so far

VOC

94 families in hotel in Chicopee

27 families in PSH who are from the hotel, placed in apartments

small congregate shelter full with 14

Discussion of HomeBASE limitations:

- rents are so high - even with the increased HB amount, it's not enough to cover the cost, esp in the case of large families;
- sustainability is a significant issue - how to use HB to rent when no income or insufficient income
- frequently much of the HB benefit must be used to pay back rent
- Landlords can require income at 3X the cost of rent which is virtually impossible; if families do not have a voucher or established income, LLs won't even consider them (regardless of HB benefit)

Discussion of Secure Jobs, administered by Way Finders - workforce support for families who are eligible for RAFT, HomeBASE or EA. Provides assistance with employment search and/or training, etc. Offers flexible funding to remove barriers. Contact Jasmin Rojas at Way Finders for more info and to provide a referral: jrojas@wayfinders.org. Jasmin is also happy to offer a program presentation for any providers who are interested.

RAFT update:

From Way Finders: Demand is as high as ever - it dipped briefly for one week after new year's - less than 500 applications - but up again the next week; approx. 120 individuals walking into office every day; 500-600 applications each week; 2,400 applications in the queue.

Special Presentation: Rosa Tobin and Maureen St. Cyr, Mass Fair Housing Center:

Rosa and Maureen described a program offered jointly by the Fair Housing Alliance of MA - MA Fair Housing Center, Community Legal Aid, Housing Discrimination Testing Project and South Coast Fair Housing Center - to address housing discrimination, particularly with regard to discrimination based on voucher use (e.g., where a LL requires income 3x rent and fails to account for a voucher, that is considered discrimination).

If you suspect discrimination (they will do the investigation to assess the case, just call if you suspect!), either call the central number: 508-444-9332 or email Maureen or Rosa at mstcyr@massfairhousing.org or rtobin@massfairhousing.org. Learn more here: <https://www.mafham.org/>

Housing Bond Bill ("Affordable Homes Act") Hearing: This hearing is happening on Thurs., Jan. 18. This bill is an extremely important opportunity to increase investment in affordable housing and pass other policies (e.g., transfer fee for affordable housing, eviction record sealing). Go to the [Network blog post](#) to learn more and get sample testimony that you can use to adapt for your own!