

Western MA Task Force for Housing First Minutes - 2/27/24

In attendance: approx. 60 Network partners, including legislators, legislative aides, city and town staff and dozens of shelter, housing and community providers across the 4 western counties

FY25 Budget Update: Big thanks to Representative Natalie Blais, a member of the House Ways and Means Committee, for sharing with us an update on the FY25 budget process. Right now the Joint Ways and Means Committee is holding a series of 8 legislative hearings to hear from Administration officials and other lead partners on the Governor's proposed FY25 budget. See the [hearing schedule here](#).

Other Western MA legislators on the Ways and Means Committee include: Reps. Duffy, Pease, Ramos, Williams and Senators Gomez and Comerford. The House Ways and Means Committee will release its proposed budget at the end of April, it will be debated and passed, and then the Senate proposes its budget in May (similarly debated and passed) and then both budgets will be reconciled through Conference Committee before the start of the next fiscal year on July 1.

This is the first year in many years that revenue projections are down. It will be a tight budget year, which makes our advocacy as critical as ever ([see the Network's FY25 budget priorities here](#)). We are fortunate with a great delegation that supports these priorities and they need to hear from us to help fuel their push to leadership. Please stay connected via the [Network blog](#) for advocacy opportunities.

Affordable Homes Act Update: Another big thanks to Senator Jo Comerford for offering an update on western MA legislative advocacy for a housing bond bill that supports our western MA needs. Sen. Comerford and Rep. Gonzalez spearheaded a [legislative delegation letter](#) to Housing Committee Chairs that outlined our western MA recommendations (via the Western MA Housing Coalition and with the support of the Network). She is now working in partnership with our rurally based legislators to submit a letter urging amendments to the bill that will better meet rural communities needs. She looks forward to continuing to partner with the Network and the Western MA Housing Coalition to make this bill as strong as it can be. And we will keep working with our legislators to bring western MA's needs to the table!

Access to Counsel and Eviction Record Sealing: Yet another big thanks to Annette Duke of Mass. Law Reform Institute for bringing us these updates on our priority bills.

Access to Counsel: Governor Healey included Access to Counsel in her proposed FY25 budget - a big step forward around signaling her support - at \$3.5 million. These would be start-up funds. The lasting win is to include the bill language that would create the Access to Counsel program, and that could happen either by adding the bill language to the budget or by adding it to the bond bill (the Affordable Homes Act) or by passing the bill as is (the bill can be found [here](#)). The good news is that the Judiciary Committee reported the bill out favorably. Momentum is growing. This bill would provide access to full representation for low-income tenants and low-income owner occupants. Right now 4 states and 17 cities have some version of Access to Counsel. We know that the lack of representation (over 90% of landlords have lawyers; less than 3% of tenants do) is a driver of homelessness. Right now the strategic focus

is on House Ways and Means Chair Aaron Michlewitz in order to gain his support of this program in the House budget.

To join the campaign - be listed as a supporter - go here: <https://www.massrtc.org/supporters.html>. We'll stay connected on the blog around next action steps.

Eviction Record sealing: Right now when a landlord files an eviction, it is immediately on the tenant's public record that landlords can easily search. This is a huge barrier for tenants seeking housing (and prolongs homelessness) and there is no process for sealing the record (13 states have some version of sealing). The HOMES Act (filed by Sen. Edwards and Rep. Moran) is a bill that would create record sealing. The good news is that it got reported out favorably from the Judiciary Committee with some improvements. Right now automatic sealing is not in the bill - it requires the tenant to petition to seal, which leaves a huge barrier. But it was improved to allow for tenants to immediately petition to seal evictions in cases of dismissals or tenant wins or no-fault evictions. The housing bond bill also included eviction record sealing - a great advance! - but again, there is no automatic sealing and it does not allow for immediate petitions for the cases outlined above. The focus is getting the HOMES Act in the bond bill with automatic sealing. A factsheet outlining the requested changes will be available shortly.

Shelter Updates:

All individual shelters are filled to capacity, including wait lists in some locations.

It was noted by several providers that they are seeing more medically complex individuals (e.g., one individual with stage 4 cancer) and more elderly in general and more young adults.

It was also noted that housing vouchers are absolutely critical to move individuals or families out of shelter - they simply cannot afford to live in housing without this subsidy. This fact is a major contributing factor to long stays in shelter - people cannot afford to move anywhere.

The family shelter system has roughly 700 EA eligible families on the "wait list." It's unclear right now how many are in overflow beds (a new site is opening in eastern MA) but there is definitely a gap between the # of overflow beds and the # of families on the wait list.

RAFT update via Way Finders (Hampden and Hampshire Counties): roughly 100-150 people coming in each day - over 2,000 applications in process, another 1,000 in draft - for a few months, seeing an average 700-800 - just under 600 last week - short-staffed, so average for approval is 35 days - they have had to deny 600 households who have maxed out on their RAFT benefit already.

Upcoming Advocacy: MA Coalition for the Homeless is organizing a Legislative Action Day at the State House on March 7. Pamela is attending as is Will Davila from CHD. Please let Pamela know if you want to join! Read more here:

<https://mahomeless.org/legislative-action-day-2024/>

The Network's 8th Annual Regional Gathering has a date! Friday, May 31, 10 am - 11:30 am at Holyoke Community College. See the [flyer and registration link here](#). Join us!

Next meeting: Thursday, March 28, 9 am.