

Family Services Committee Meeting - 3/12/24

In attendance: Melissa Blissett, Square One, Ellen Broadhurst, clinical social worker, Anthia Elliott, Ware BHN, Luray Fladd, YWCA, Brenda Garcia, BHN, Ivillesse Gonzalez, New North Citizens Council, Joscelyn Gonzalez, New North Citizens Council, Olga Kravchenko, Springfield Habitat for Humanity, Dora Lambertus, BHN, Sara Landaverde, YWCA, Jennifer Gonzalez Morales, Holyoke Public Schools, Theresa Nicholson, CHD, Lizzy Ortiz, 3C Health Services for the Homeless, Sara Pena, Way Finders, Stacy Parsons, Berkshire Public Schools/DESE, Heather Roy, DTA/DV, Pamela Schwartz, WMNEH, Noah Singer, Rachel Trant, DCF, Janette Vigo, Way Finders, Amanda Watson, Franklin County Regional Housing, Melissa White, VOC

First, **A BIG THANK YOU to Theresa Nicholson** who directed CHD's Housing and Homelessness Program for 6 years as she prepares to depart for a new job as Executive Director of an individual shelter in Connecticut. We expressed our gratitude for her immense work and the tremendous impact she has had on so many lives in western Massachusetts. Thank you, Theresa, and best of luck!

Family shelter updates:

CHD, Way Finders and Valley Opportunity Council all noted that the new vouchers and incentives are making an impact on the rehousing effort. CHD noted they are housing as many as 15-18 families per month (up from pre-Covid times) and other providers share the increase. Additionally, the increase in HomeBASE benefits for up to 3 years is making a difference for landlords' receptivity. CHD noted fewer immigrant families in the population overall (now closer to a 50-50 split between recent immigrants and not); all noted among immigrant families, they are predominantly Haitian. Working with refugee support services and language services. Staffing with needed language skills in particular continues to be a big challenge.

It was noted that roughly 800 families are now on the statewide EA wait list.

Supplemental budget update re: shelter stay limits:

Pamela reported out thanks to an update she received from Kelly Turley of the MA Coalition for the Homeless. Last week the MA House of Representatives passed a supplemental budget that included \$245 million of needed funds to support the EA shelter system for the remainder of this fiscal year. That budget also included a provision setting limits to shelter stay of 9-12 months, depending on certain criteria. This provision would go into effect on April 1 (so soonest time limit would be Jan. 2025).

Group feedback on this proposal included:

- not enough information to process what this would look like - as is right now, it is extremely difficult to terminate a family from shelter - impossible to imagine how this would be managed
- where will families go? "for many it will be a complete disaster"
- very concerned about adding on trauma to the families, particularly the children who would have to relocate schools, etc.

- "it won't work"

Pamela urged everyone to catch the **Network blog emails** ([subscribe here if not already](#)) to stay connected to action steps to push back against this proposal. The Senate will take up the supplemental budget bill next and we will have a chance to weigh in.

Other policy updates:

Pamela reported that the Affordable Homes Act (the housing bond bill) was reported out favorably from the Housing Committee. This is a step in the right direction, although also disappointing because it did not include necessary changes to the real estate transfer fee for affordable housing (to lower the threshold to below \$1m so western MA communities can use it) or eviction record sealing (to allow for automatic sealing in some cases). Now the bill will go to the Bonding Committee and then House Ways and Means - much more advocacy to be done. Again, stay tuned via the Network blog!

Pamela reminded everyone of the upcoming Network Annual Event on May 31 - please come and [register here ASAP](#)

This Committee's meeting frequency/content:

Pamela checked in with the group about these meetings, welcoming feedback on the frequency and content. The feedback affirmed the utility of monthly meetings and the information sharing that currently happens. Onward!

Next meeting date: Tues, April 9, 12 noon