

Western MA Task Force for Housing First Meeting Minutes - 3/28/24

In attendance: Approximately 50 people, including state legislators, legislative aides, municipal staff and dozens of providers

Update from Senator Jo Comerford

Senator Comerford provided two timely updates on the Affordable Homes Act and the FY24 Supplemental Budget

- **The Affordable Homes Act** was reported out by the Housing Committee in early March without any changes. It is now before the Bonding Committee next Tuesday. This will be a largely fiscal review (as opposed to a policy one), as underscored by Representative Mike Finn who was also on the call who is Chair of the Bonding Committee. Then it will go to the House Ways and Means Committee. This is the time for western MA to get as clear as possible on our top priorities. Sen. Comerford thanked the region for the work thus far that facilitated these two legislative sign-on letters in support of Western MA priorities - [one relying on the recommendations of the Western MA Housing Coalition](#); the other on [input from our rural communities](#). Pamela will help to convene Western MA partners shortly to discuss our coordinated messaging as this bill moves forward.
- **The FY24 Supplemental Budget** - both the House and Senate budgets contained proposals for family shelter stay limits, and there were differences between them. In the Senate budget, an amendment was adopted to create a task force, that included \$10 million in flexible dollars for both EA and Refugee Resettlement providers. The Senate budget also allocated all of the remaining ARPA funds (approx. \$830 million) to address this challenge. The budgets are now in Conference Committee where differences will be resolved.

Andrea Park, an attorney with Mass Law Reform Institute and close partner of Mass. Coalition for the Homeless, shared some additional insight on shelter stay limits. She noted that the Senate budget provisions are "less punitive" since it allows for families to stay beyond the declared limits if they are making efforts towards their rehousing. She noted that while the federal government needs to do more, the greatest challenge is the extreme lack of affordable housing (that prior to the immigration crisis - in 2022, when there were 3,600 families in shelter, the average stay was over a year). She also noted the dire need for more housing search assistance, more staffing - all ongoing challenges - and urged legislators to stay connected to the shared goal of protecting children from living on the street. Shelter stay limits will not solve this crisis, and in fact will end up costing the state more while traumatizing children even more. The Senate's task force proposal offers a positive step of regional focus and flexible dollars and an important opportunity to examine the EA system's functionality as a whole.

Andrea also noted recent rules implemented by HLC at their overflow sites to require recertification by families every 30 days to verify efforts around English language learning, job training and rehousing. The vast majority of these families are in the Boston area (no HLC overflow sites in Western MA at this time).

Individual Shelter and Housing Updates:

CSO: at capacity; noted working with increasing number of elders; also noted the experimentation with the shared housing model - believes it offers a lot of promise for meeting the housing need and providing individuals with community

Craig's Doors - at capacity and winter expansion of 20 beds is about to end as the winter season ends - working hard at ensuring these individuals have a safe place to go. Seeing an increase in number of referrals and more individuals seeking help at the resource center; Low-threshold housing program is going great

Pittsfield - shelter is full; operating warming center which will only be available for another month (concerned for the individuals who use it)

North Adams - demand is unrelenting; people are sleeping on cots and couches as winding down winter capacity

Valley CDC update: ED Alexis Breitenacher reported that Valley received a zoning permit for 30 affordable homes in North Amherst (after a very long process!) and next up is developing 20 affordable units on Village Hill in Northampton. Alexis also noted a visit from Secretary Augustus to a Northampton affordable housing development (with the Northampton Mayor).

Northampton Community Resilience Hub - Gilad Meron, Director of the Hub, reported on the progress for the Hub - a service and resource coordination center in the works for the Northampton area. Public meetings have begun, which offer an opportunity for community input - see [the flyer](#) for additional dates ahead.

Other Budget and Policy Updates:

The Network submitted [written testimony](#) to the Joint Committee on Ways and Means, focusing on Access to Counsel and also noted our [FY25 budget priorities](#).

Other training announcements:

Racial Equity Series Trainings:

<https://www.westernmasshousingfirst.org/training/2024/new-three-county-coc-racial-equity-training-series/>

Attorney General Series

Trainings: <https://www.westernmasshousingfirst.org/training/2024/new-attorney-generals-office-3-county-coc-training-series/>

Next meeting date: Tuesday, April 30