

Western MA Task Force For Housing First Minutes - April 29, 2024

In attendance: approximately 58 Network partners, including state legislators and aides, municipal staff, state agency representatives and dozens of housing, homelessness and other service providers

FY25 House Budget Update

Special thanks to Representative Natalie Blais for providing this update on the FY25 House budget that was just finalized last week. The House budget passed 153 to 4, totaling \$58 billion, at a time when revenue projections are down and fiscal concerns are high. Housing and homelessness items were largely level-funded. Rep. Blais offered these highlights:

- \$325 million for Emergency Assistance
- \$219 million for MA Rental Voucher Program
- \$197.4 million for RAFT
- \$57.3 million for HomeBASE
- \$10 million for shelter workforce assistance
- FREE universal school meals - one of 8 states in the country - since 2019 through Oct. 2023, more than 100,000 MA children partook of a free school lunch
- NEW environmental justice fund to support remediation projects in disadvantaged communities (thanks to Rep. Blais and Rep. Duffy for their leadership on this)
- RECORD FUNDING for regional transit authority (special thanks to Rep. Blais for her leadership on this)
- ACCESS TO COUNSEL IN EVICTIONS funded in a new line item for the first time (at \$2.5 million) - a very big deal to create a new line item, especially given the lower revenue projections (thanks to Rep. Farley-Bouvier shouting that out and for her chairing the Progressive Caucus that championed it)

Joyce Tavon of Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance (MHSA) also offered highlights on the programs that serve individuals experiencing homelessness, most of which were level-funded, including:

- Home and Healthy for Good (permanent supportive housing) was reinstated (from cut in Governor's budget) at level funding
- Sponsor-based permanent supportive housing was level-funded
- Shelter Workforce development was reinstated (from Gov's cut) at \$10 million - this helps provide boosts for front line shelter workers
- Bureau of Substance Abuse (BSAS) low threshold housing - funded at \$10 million which is lower than last year (a bit confusing, will work to address in Senate budget)

Kelly Turley of the MA Coalition for the Homeless offered additional information on the FY24 supplemental and FY25 budget:

- The FY24 supplemental budget passed and included \$251 million for the current fiscal year for Emergency Assistance (EA) family shelter and \$175 million for FY25 (all of these funds will be drawn down from the escrow fund).

- The supplemental budget also included shelter stay limits for the first time in the program's 40 year history. Families are permitted to stay in shelter for 9 months and then eligible for two 90 day extensions. After that point, they may apply for a hardship waiver to be approved by the HLC Secretary.
- Kelly noted that due to the current extremely tight housing market, families can need shelter for as long as 14 to 16 months. There is concern that some families may be pushed out of shelter prematurely, and there is already confusion among families about whether they have to leave now if they have already been in shelter for 9 months (not the case, the "clock" starts June 1). The goal now is to ensure that there is maximum clarity around the standards for evaluating extension requests and to ensure that families are receiving the resources they need. The FY24 supplemental budget also included increased funding for HomeBASE (rehousing program) to make exits more possible and the work is to ensure that the final FY25 budget includes those increases as well.
- For FY25, the EA program is estimated to cost over \$900 million - it is assumed that these supplemental budget requests will be needed to cover the cost in FY25.
- It was also noted that the shelter cap of 7,500 families continues and new regulations are going into effect now that will require families to be reevaluated every 30 days to continue to stay at overflow sites.
- See MA Coalition for the Homeless' detailed budget breakdown here: www.tinyurl.com/mchfy2025

The Network will continue to provide updates on the budget process - the Senate Ways and Means Committee's proposed budget will be released in early May - via the Network blog. Be sure to [subscribe!](#)

Special Guest: Carolyn Chou, Homes for All MA

We welcomed Carolyn Chou, the new executive director for [Homes for All MA](#), a coalition of tenant organizing and housing justice groups anchored by our western MA partner Springfield No One Leaves, along with Lynn United for Justice and City Life/Vida Urbana in Boston. Arise for Social Justice

Carolyn provided an overview of the work of HFA to support the organizing and policy advocacy work of tenants and low-income homeowners statewide. They are currently focused on two legislative priorities: rent control and foreclosure prevention. And above all, their goal is to ensure people can live and thrive in Massachusetts and fundamentally stay in their homes. She welcomed [organizations' endorsements of their platform](#). She also flagged an action at the State House on May 15 to draw attention to housing and economic justice.

The Network is pleased to continue working with Springfield No One Leaves and HFA on our shared housing justice platform.

Shelter and other homelessness updates

Pamela reported in summary that all individual shelters in western MA continue to be full to capacity, several with wait lists.

Gerry McCafferty shared findings of the Hampden CoC Point in Time Count:

- homelessness increased overall 7.8% relative to Jan. 2023 with a total number of 2,892 persons counted as experiencing homelessness
- the biggest news is the increase in the number of unsheltered homelessness: a 54% increase - 177 people. This contrasted to 2021 (height of pandemic interventions) when the number was 30.
- The Hampden CoC will get into more detail at its annual meeting on May 10 at 9 am at Mental Health Association at 350 Memorial Drive, Chicopee

HLC's Homeless Individual System Needs Assessment: Pamela shared this recent analysis by the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (HLC) of the individual homelessness system. We reviewed the findings and recommendations together, which included:

- significant increases in shelter capacity have not reduced the number of homeless people. Adding shelter capacity, while necessary, as a sole intervention has proven ineffective in reducing homelessness.
- HLC spends less money per person per night in Permanent Supportive Housing settings than in emergency shelter settings.

Read more in the [full report](#). Special thanks to Gordie Calkins, HLC's Director of Individual Homelessness Systems.

Affordable Homes Act Update and Advocacy: The Affordable Homes Act was reported favorably out of the Housing Committee and more recently out of the Bonding Committee without changes. It is next before the House Ways and Means Committee, which will be the time to push for our changes. The Western MA Housing Coalition, with the Network's support, refined its top priorities for amendments and will be delivering them to the delegation this week. We reviewed the [WMHC document here](#).

Homeless Encampments: Shaundell Diaz of the Three County CoC announced the formation of the Three County Emergency Response Coalition to provide support and guidance around responses to encampments. The Coalition will be comprised of service providers, local advocates and people with lived experience. Please stay tuned for additional information and opportunity to learn more. The work will be guided by the [US Interagency Council on Homelessness 7 principles for addressing encampments](#).

Next meeting date: we will convene in person at our [Annual Gathering on May 31, 9:30 am](#) at Holyoke Community College and we will meet next virtually on Thursday, June 20.