

Western MA Task Force for Housing First Minutes - 12/4/25

In attendance: approximately 65 people, including legislators, legislative aides, municipal staff, and dozens of housing and homelessness and other community service providers

Emergency Winter Shelter

With extremely cold temperatures upon us, Pamela reminded everyone of the recent winter shelter expansion, thanks in large part to HLC funding, as well as city and other local resources. See the updated [shelter directory here](#). Also see Greenfield and Athol warming center information [here](#).

Family homelessness crisis - reduction in beds, current EA regulations are leaving families in the cold

We discussed the consequence of recent changes to the Emergency Assistance program that have seen a drastic decline in the number of beds available in our region (and statewide), along with more restrictive eligibility criteria (the end of presumptive eligibility so that families must have all documents in order as well as a CORI check completed before gaining access) and time limits (families must exit shelter within 6 months). These changes have resulted in an increasing number of families living in places not fit for human habitation, from hospital emergency rooms to cars and parks.

The Network recently [testified](#) in support of H.216, a bill that would address these limitations (e.g., restore presumptive eligibility and extend time limit from 6 months to 9 months, among other changes). The Senate version of the bill (S.136), with lead sponsor Senator Adam Gomez (thank you, Sen. Gomez), has already been reported favorably out of committee and is now in the Senate Ways and Means Committee. We are continuing to push on moving both bills forward (see summary [overview of both bills here](#)), and also addressing these concerns in the upcoming FY26 Supplemental Budget.

We also heard from:

- Keith Fairey, CEO, Way Finders: Keith reported that a year ago Way Finders had capacity for 279 beds for families; that number has been reduced by 55. Way Finders also submitted testimony in support of H.216. He noted that families are being denied access and they are also being forced to leave at the time limit, only to have to reapply again (and face the hurdles to gain access). He noted that the Administration needs to be driven by the outcomes it seeks (safety, housing stability) and determine the appropriate system changes to get there; that the current rule changes are not getting us closer to the outcomes we all seek. We face similar questions with HomeBASE - what is the plan when HomeBASE runs out, where do families go? We know we all share the goal of preventing a return to shelter, so we must address how the system needs to be structured to prevent that from happening.
- Polly Normand, VP of Community Programs and Erin Forbush, Director of Housing and Shelter for ServiceNet: Polly and Erin shared ServiceNet's similar experiences with the EA changes. They serve Berkshire and Franklin Counties. A year ago they had 124 units, as of Jan. 1 they will be down to 39. This reduction is NOT a reflection of reduced need

in their region. They have been tracking data over the last 11 weeks and are seeing an average of 4 families each week who appear otherwise eligible but are not able to gain access to EA. Erin relayed the story of a pregnant woman who could not get into EA and after giving birth in the hospital, without shelter or a home to return to, lost her baby to foster care. They also noted there is no HLC office in Pittsfield or Greenfield, so families must rely entirely on remote access, which creates yet another huge barrier. ServiceNet also submitted testimony in support of H.216. They called out an additional provision of the bill that would require 90 days notice to providers when policy changes are being made - this is key to allow providers to prepare for changes and best serve families.

- Liz Plouffe, social worker, Baystate Emergency Department - noted she is seeing more and more families coming in and sleeping in the ER - they are coming either because they can't get hold of the documents to get into shelter or because they have timed out (past the 6 month mark). The ER is increasingly keeping families overnight.
- Deb McLaughlin, Director, Franklin County Opioid Task Force - reported on behalf of a provider in West Franklin County that they are currently supporting 3 families in hotels because they cannot gain access to EA. This is unsustainable, not sure what will happen next.
- Kelly Turley, Associate Director, Mass. Coalition for the Homeless - provided statewide perspective - the EA system is now down to fewer than 1,900 families from a peak of 7,500 post COVID (during the migrant crisis) and is lower than it has been for many years (pre COVID the number was roughly 3,000). This dramatic shrinking of the system, curtailing access and imposing time limits, is causing harm to families - across the state they are waiting in hospital ERs and sleeping in places not fit for human habitation. HLC is making changes to the system without notice to legislators or providers. The EA improvement bill (H.216/S.136) would be a significant step towards repair, and the supplemental budget is another vehicle that will be pursued.

We will keep our Network posted about next steps for continuing advocacy.

Permanent Supportive Housing (and our CoCs) Face Extreme Threat

Joyce Tavon of Mass Housing and Shelter Alliance provided an overview of HUD's recent actions that threaten continued funding for permanent supportive housing for hundreds of thousands across the country, thousands across the state and over 400 people in our region. Please see MHSA's [overview here](#) of the impact and policy changes at stake here.

HUD recently launched a new funding competition for the CoCs that prohibit CoCs from allocating more than 30% of its funding to permanent supportive housing (PSH). Right now, our CoCs allocate over 80% of its funding for PSH, thereby threatening continued housing for hundreds in the region. CoCs here and state and nationwide are scrambling to adapt its applications to meet these new requirements by the application deadline of Jan. 14 (with our CoC's local funding applications due by 12/12 or 12/15).

As this process unfolds, two lawsuits have been filed, one by the MA Attorney General, along with 20 other states, and one by national and local non-profits and local governments (MHSA has joined that lawsuit as a declarant with an impact statement). Both lawsuits have been filed in RI District Court and initial hearings are scheduled for tomorrow. Congressional advocacy also continues.

Hampden CoC: Gerry McCafferty reported out that the Hampden CoC currently receives \$9 million annually and their funding currently covers 304 PSH units. Local organizations are already adjusting how they will apply under the new terms (one agency is not applying for funding at all - a loss of 25 units for people who have been chronically homeless and are HIV positive). The CoC is working hard to prioritize people with the most intense needs. To see their Request for Proposals (due 12/15), [go here](#).

Three County CoC: Shaundell Diaz reported out that the Three County CoC currently receives \$3.7 million. They are prioritizing coordinated entry and HMIS grants, along with \$750,000 for PSH allocated in a manner that supports geographic diversity. To see their Request for Proposals (due 12/12), [go here](#).

Comments:

- Can we check out CDBG funding requirements (via state CDBG funds in particular) that would make it possible to bypass the 30% limit on housing related projects (noting that this is a HUD requirement)
- Another possible resource to explore is HOME-ARP funds that entitlement communities receive - could these funds be used to offset some of the losses to PSH?

Legislative Advocacy Update

Pamela shared that organizing is happening now for our January/February county-based legislator meetings to advocate for our FY27 budget priorities and FY26 supplemental budget priorities as well. Meetings will take place for Hampden County, Hampshire/Franklin Counties and Berkshire County. Please stay tuned on confirmed dates and times and please let Pamela know if you are interested in attending.

Re: legislative testimony: All of the Network's legislative testimony can now be found here: <https://www.westernmasshousingfirst.org/testimonies/>

Next meeting date: Thursday, January 15, 9 am