

## **Western MA Task Force for Housing First Minutes - 1/15/26**

*In attendance: roughly 65 Network partners, including state legislators, legislative staff, municipal representatives, housing, homelessness and community providers*

### **With gratitude to Representative Natalie Blais**

We acknowledged that Rep. Blais is leaving office this week to accept a position at UMass. We expressed our heartfelt gratitude for her years of service representing the first Franklin District and her leadership across the region. Her legislative aide Kelly O'Reilly let everyone know that Rep. Blais' office will continue to be staffed and at the ready to respond to constituent needs. Thank you, Rep. Blais!

### **Family Homelessness Updates**

Kelly Turley, Mass. Coalition for the Homeless, provided us with this statewide update:

- Fewer than 1,500 families are currently in the EA shelter system, down from 7,600 families in mid-2024
- This decrease is due to new restrictions on access and shelter stay time limits (down from 9 months to 6 months). The biggest restriction on access is the end of "presumptive eligibility" (which has been in place for 20 years) - this is the ability for families to gain access to shelter prior to the submission of all documents while clearly experiencing homelessness. Now all documents MUST be complete before admission is allowed, and a CORI check must be completed - a system which can experience delays over which the families have no control.
- As a result of advocacy and in the face of the winter weather, HLC has extended stays to 91 days for all families sheltered between December and March.
- HomeBASE is also under intense demand - a 2 year program capped at \$30K over (legislature allowed for a 3rd year but HLC is not implementing this). Many families are getting housed in precarious situations, exhaust funding and must return to shelter.
- HLC is providing alternative placements to families at high risk (only for high priority categories); this does not address the unmet need for many other families.
- Right now there are over 3,000 EA beds and less than half are full. While families are living unsheltered. This is deeply concerning.
- A reprocurement of the shelter system is underway - there is concern that the artificially low numbers (born of restricted access and time limits) will drive the family capacity down even further.

**Senator Jo Comerford's comments:** Gov. Healey will be releasing her FY27 budget on Jan. 28 (in addition to other supplemental budgets). We will have more information then. There will be a series of Ways and Means Committee hearings which is an opportunity to weigh in. It's critically important to hear from providers and community members.

**Advocacy asks** In any supplemental budget and in the FY27 budget, there will be a push to revise the time limits and presumptive eligibility and a push for more legislative oversight.

MA Coalition for the Homeless Legislative Action Day: Thursday, March 5th: <https://www.mahomeless.org/legislative-action-day> - please join!

Pamela urged everyone to stay connected re: action steps via the Network blog. [Subscribe here](#). Big thanks to our legislators for their advocacy on behalf of our most vulnerable families.

### **Individual shelters updates**

All shelters are full, even with expanded capacity.

**Craig's Doors Update:** The 38 shelter beds at the Econolodge are coming to an end on April 1 because Valley CDC is at the next stage of developing the property into permanent affordable housing (the good news/bad news of this situation). Craig's Doors is looking for an alternative location but has not identified one yet; continuing to explore other possibilities and grateful to work with local partners on rehousing or re-sheltering possibilities as needed. Also working with EOHLC on the issue.

**St John's Church, Northampton** - new overflow emergency shelter capacity: St. John's has opened an overflow winter shelter that opens when the temperature is 15 degrees or lower. 12 beds. All run by volunteers. Pamela will update the shelter directory list as soon as the information is confirmed.

Wesley United Methodist Church, Springfield is running its 40 bed shelter through the winter season. Learn more at our emergency shelter listing [here](#).

Franklin County Update: latest update to their latest update to the Franklin County/North Quabbin Emergency Response Services for Unhoused Individuals is [here](#).

### **RAFT Updates**

**Hampden/Hampshire Counties** (Way Finders): 865 applications this past week alone; roughly 200 people entering the front door each day. Majority renters, an uptick in homeowners. Need is as great and urgent as ever.

**Berkshire County (Hearthway)** - same intense demand; one particular disturbing trend is individuals whose "letter of intent" that RAFT is available expires due to a lack of any available housing.

**Franklin County (Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority):** while not in attendance for this meeting, Pamela heard yesterday the same report on very high demand.

### **CoC Updates:**

Gerry McCafferty, Director of the Hampden County Continuum of Care, provided an overview of the threat posed by the federal administration:

- Just yesterday, the Trump Administration summarily canceled 2,000 SAMHSA (substance abuse treatment) programs, only to reinstate them the next day.
- Last summer, President Trump issued an Executive Order explicitly rejecting Housing First in favor of short-term housing conditional on treatment.
- In November, HUD attempted to interrupt the 2 year CoC funding by imposing a new funding applicaiton with criteria that would severely impact CoCs' ability to provide permanent supportive housing. Two lawsuits were filed (one by our MA AG and other AGs) and the district court judge issued a preliminary injunction enjoining HUD from imposing this new NOFO on CoCs. A final decision in this hearing will be made in February. Even if the judge rules favorably, it is presumed that HUD will try again with a new funding cycle.
- The CoC funding pays for housing for 3,800 formerly chronically homeless, disabled individuals; 170,000 nationwide. The CoCs are working together, assessing various strategies; here in MA, working closely with the Mass. Housing and Shelter Alliance (MHSA) to think through a 2-5 year contingency plan for how the state can best respond to this crisis.
- We are also continuing to work on the Congressional level in an effort to gain passage of language that would require HUD to maintain the current NOFO. Pamela and our CoC leads and other partners have been meeting with our Congressional delegation to ensure an understanding of the local impact and offer our support in their efforts to defend the program.

### **Point in Time Counts:**

This annual HUD mandated Point in Time Count is happening soon:

[Three County CoC](#) - Jan. 25

[Hampden County CoC](#) - Jan. 28

### **Upcoming Network Legislative meetings:**

The Network will convene its annual county-based legislator meetings over the next few weeks where we will share our FY27 budget priorities and revisit our legislative priorities.

SAVE THE DATE: The Network Annual Gathering: Friday, May 29, 11:30 am - 1:00 pm, Holyoke Community College - stay tuned for more information soon!

**Task Force Next Meeting Date: Thursday, Feb. 26, 9 am**