**Family Homelessness Retreat**

**Feb. 14, 2017**

*In attendance: Jesus Arce, City of Springfield, Jane Banks, Center for Human Development (CHD), Sue Beaton, Fireman Family Foundation, Yoshi Bird, CHD, Shelly Benoit, Behavioral Health Network (BHN), Kim Borden, Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority, Rebecca Chaverri, Holyoke Public Schools, Joel Cox, New England Farmworkers Community (NEFWC), Hillary Cronin, VA, Juan Cruz, NEFWC, Anthia Elliott, Safe Passage, Rose Evans, DHCD, Brad Gordon, Berkshire Regional Housing Authority, Steve Huntley, Valley Opportunity Council, Fran LeMay, ServiceNet, Jane Lindfors, DTA/DV unit, Heather Marshall, Elizabeth Freeman Center, Yeisie Mateo, DCF, Michelle Michaelian, BHN, Gerry McCafferty, City of Springfield/Hampden County CoC, Donna Nadeau, DHCD, Carmen Navarro, NEFWC, Lizzy Ortiz, Holyke Public Schools, Kristin Peterson, YWCA of Western Mass., Jenni Pothier, Mental Health Association, Tenancy Preservation Program, Carmen Roman, DCF, Jay Sachetti, ServiceNet, Pamela Schwartz, Network, Tonya Sparks, WomanShelter/Companera, Janna Teatreault, Community Action, Janette Vigo, HAPHousing, Lauren Voyer, HAPHousing, Mandy Winalski, Community Legal Aid*

**DHCD Deputy Undersecretary Rose Evans offered comments on the family homelessness system** (condensed and summarized):

Today there are 3,528 families in the family homelessness system, a decrease of 25% since December, 2015. DHCD has a strategic plan with clear goals and performance measures, which includes diversifying the response to family homelessness, going beyond a shelter response to a housing response. The effort is data driven with clear outcomes informing the strategic plan. A central challenge is helping people exit shelter in the face of a very tight and largely unaffordable housing market; providing appropriate support and guidance for maintaining tenancies.

The system is also being taxed by an increase in homeless individuals, for example, in Boston there are 10 new individuals presenting as homeless on a daily basis. The individual shelter system has never been procured and a procurement plan is underway.

The current family system sun-sets in Dec. 2018 and there will be a re-procurement for FY19. It is possible both the family and individual systems will be procured together, providing a first-time opportunity for the individual shelter system and an overall opportunity for both systems to consider coordination.

There will not be any changes in eligibility for Emergency Assistance. The challenge and focus will be on systematization while also acknowledging differences among regions and populations. The Consortium model is intended to provide a vehicle for this kind of coordination. There is a priority on expanding inter-agency relationships, potentially co-locating state agencies and standardizing protocols across EOHHS. There will be special emphasis on the localities that have over 51% of the homeless family population (of which Springfield is one).

Rose applauded the Western region for its track record of exceptional performance and innovation and collaboration in housing homeless families.

**Sue Beaton, Special Initiatives Director of the Fireman Family Foundation, offered her comments** (condensed and summarized):

Sue offered a history of the State’s response to family homelessness over the last several decades and how we have made tremendous progress in developing systems that are more family focused. She stressed the importance of addressing the question of the State’s value of the regional approach; the importance of keeping children locally based in their home communities; integrating the “tool box” (e.g., Secure Jobs flexible funding and one-on-one approach); the importance of data in determining what works and what doesn’t; the importance of continuous learning and adaptation and the fundamental principle of using shelter as a last resort.

**Mapping the system and key data. Please see attached.**

Gerry provided a map of the family homelessness system and key Hampden County data (note: only Hampden County data was available because the Hampden County CoC provided it; all acknowledged the value of data review as a model across the region).

The group expressed great appreciation for this map. Gerry welcomed feedback for adjustments, e.g., giving “Prevention” its own “satellites” of influence; create an “arrow” that captures the work of assisting families who have made it out of homelessness into stable housing but are now facing instability – prevention at that end of the spectrum. Participants are encouraged to email Gerry at GMcCafferty@springfieldcityhall.com with suggested additions or changes.

**Feedback from first break-out groups on initial reactions to map and data:**

* How can we use code enforcement as a prevention tool?
* How do we build partnerships across the state when families are being moved?
* How do we enlist housing authorities to prevent evictions from subsidized housing?
* How do we address the “cliff effect” so as to incentivize earning more income (without the consequence of losing benefits)
* How do we address the Friday afternoon 3 pm emergency calls?
* How do we refine our assessments to better determine the level of appropriate engagement?
* How do we increase engagement with DMH and DCF?
* How do we integrate the current immigration issue and its impact on serving families (i.e., the consequences of DCF as mandated reporter and the fears of leading to deportation)
* How do we address the uniquely rural challenges, specifically with regard to accessing DTA/DHCD offices (the limits of phone access and the limits of transportation to Holyoke or Springfield)
* How do we keep track of the smaller pots of money – resources that can help families in a vulnerable moment – it is important to track their utility in preserving tenancies in order to be able to demonstrate their role
* How do we deal with the unintended consequence of “success” potentially threatening the investment in prevention resources
* How can we better integrate the DV system with the rest of the homelessness system? Due to under-resourcing of DV system, more and more families experiencing DV are sent to the EA system. This is a huge challenge.
* How do we maximize mental health services when they are threatening a tenancy. Consider representative payees for families? MassHealth support?

**Afternoon session: Break-out Groups Brainstormed Challenges and Possible Solutions across the 3 intervention points: Prevention; Rapid Rehousing; Stabilization. The goal was to think about solutions in terms of “what can be accomplished in 4 months, by June 30, 2017?”**

Below is a summary of the identified problems and possible solutions:

**Prevention**

**Problems:**

Need for better triage at the front door
Need for RAFT funds to be available before eviction

RAFT hoops taking too long to obtain funds

Better response plan to families arriving at the front door after 3 pm

Inconsistencies in information around EA eligibility

Landlords who don’t want to participate at all

DHCD can be unresponsive; things getting lost in the shuffle

Lack of affordable housing

Lack of resources/perspective for DV families

Need to expand diversion effort with more staff at DHCD offices

Need for a “mobile diversion team”

Need for a “mobile courthouse team” (interventions to prevent eviction)
Need for more formal protocols for outreach to other regions

Need for more linkages among DHCD resources and other resources (e.g., federally funded programs) to augment diversion/prevention effort

Better education so the larger community is aware of prevention/diversion effort

**Solutions:**

Create host family system as alternative to shelter

Enlist faith community in creating alternatives to shelter

Build relationships with key partners; improve communication

Create consistency in eligibility criteria

Build relationships with landlord; provide education around tenancies

Designate a staff person in each office for diversion assistance

Clarify appeal process for RAFT to a person who has been denied

Foster collaboration between stabilization workers and code enforcement agencies

Build communication between DCF, DMH and other state agencies and providers – ensure they know the client’s shelter provider and relationships are established

Get better data around prevention/diversion and better promote the positive impact of these interventions

Expand flexibility around use of funding resources

Prioritize allocation of funds so that families eligible for restricted funds are using them first as opposed to unrestricted funds needed for ineligible families

Help funders understand data better

Create a resource directory

**Discussion:**
Participants coalesced around wanting to ensure each person in the room (and outside of it) is aware of the resources the other is offering and understands where to go to find the resource needed. There was direct sharing of organizations people wanted to know more about and to get more clear on how to access resources. Phone numbers were exchanged!

Rose suggested learning from the South Shore’s phone resource directory service (a la 211 but more locally targeted) that has been very successful. The group agreed it would follow-up and learn more.

**Rapid Rehousing**

**Problems:**

Address families who are long shelter stayers

Work on overcoming huge barriers, including eviction history, criminal history, mental health, domestic violence history, substance abuse, lack of education or employment history

**Solutions:**

Formalize communication between diversion staff and shelter workers so the hand-off of information around each family is more complete, thereby enabling more targeted attention and a faster move out of shelter into housing

Experiment with specialization within re-housing and stabilization teams – focus on specific attributes of each team member that may be best serve specific families

Share landlord resources between case manager and housing agencies

Consider designating a housing locator, i.e., a person whose job it is to do landlord outreach all the time (note: feedback that this was tried and became complicated)

Work with local housing authorities and private landlords to collect data that tells the story of how wrap-around services can mitigate barriers

Bring all the providers to one place – a “surge” event – that maximizes flow and best match of resources

Host group workshops to share info across agencies

Work with landlord associations to increase the number of units available

Be flexible and creative – figure out how to foster that in relation to flexible resources

Focus on community outreach and education

Consider representative payee programs for families

Create pool of funds that landlords could access if trouble arises (extra assurance to rent)

**Stabilization**

**Problems:**

Likelihood of returning to homelessness in the face of unaffordable housing and insufficient income!

**Solutions:**

More trauma informed care and motivational interviewing to define work with families

Better coordination between intensive case management and financial assistance programs

More focus on building budgeting skills

Stronger relationships between landlords and providers to identify problems as they arise

Develop better assessments at time of placement around level of risk for returning to homelessness

Create system for assessment updates so families’ risk factors can regularly be monitored and measures can be taken to stabilize before crisis

Better system for communicating and off-setting cliff effect for families

Change measure of income for eligibility from gross income to net income

Reduce caseloads for stabilization staff

Fund DV housing specialists

Create plan of “intermittent assistance” over longer period of time – create incentive to stay connected so we can provide necessary support and also better track outcomes of families served

**Final Prioritizing Discussion:**

**What can we do within the next 4 months?**

**The group agreed to focus its energies on convening a regional “surge event” that offered both information sharing around resources and relationship building across the region.** The group agreed that this was a critical starting point to making broader system change: knowing the resources that exist, who the people and agencies are that are offering them and how best to access them. The 33 people in the room identified gaps of knowledge among each other and decided well-planned information sharing within this community for themselves and others in the provider realm was the best place to start. There was unanimous (hand-raised!) agreement to commit time and energy to a successful event.

We agreed that this event would replace the Network’s annual “Progress Report” event (in terms of available Network resources and focus) and that area legislators could instead be invited to this gathering as a way of learning more about the regional effort to end family homelessness.

**We agreed to continue the planning for this event at our next family services meeting on March 14, 1 pm at CHD.**

**Appreciations:**

We closed the meeting with a round of appreciations for the contributions made by so many for a successful day together, including Rose Evans and Gerry McCafferty for their leadership and planning effort, and to all the participants who devoted their day to this conversation. Thanks to all!