

Western MA Task Force for Housing First Meeting Minutes - September 19, 2024

In attendance: roughly 55 Network partners, including state legislators, legislative aides, city and town officials and staff, shelter and housing providers and community service providers

Winter Shelter Planning and Discussion

- **Franklin County:** Greenfield Mayor Ginny Desorgher presented on city efforts to address the winter shelter need. The city convened dozens of partners in August to start the planning. The current response underway includes use of the local Salvation Army space as a warming center with staffing from the Medical Reserve Corps. Franklin County Sheriff Donelan has also stepped up to offer the lobby of the jail as a back-up resource with Dept. staffing. Deb McLaughlin of the Franklin County/North Quabbin Opioid Task Force shared their work of [compiling a list of available resources](#) in both sub-regions (please let Deb know of any additions or changes - debmc@opioidtaskforce.org). Shaundell Diaz of the Three County CoC shared that the work of the EMERG Coalition to provide emergency responses to encampments also continues to develop its plan for a winter response.
- **Pittsfield:** Justine Dodds of the City of Pittsfield provided an update regarding their efforts to find space for temporary warming shelter (ServiceNet's shelter of 40 beds is full). During the pandemic, the state's emergency orders allowed for some exemptions from building code requirements in order to create the necessary shelter space. Those orders have expired, eliminating the prior options. She is hoping the state will revisit these exemptions in view of this public health emergency. The Network is lending its support and advocacy to this inquiry (for Pittsfield and the entire region).
- **Individual shelter updates regionwide:** all are full, with wait lists
- **Craig's Doors** in Amherst is working on expanding shelter at both of its sites
- **CSO** in Springfield, Northampton and Greenfield have no capacity to expand for winter shelter beds
- **CSO Northampton:** Renovation is underway for its new shelter site at 29 Industrial Drive East - slated to be done after the new year
- **CSO Greenfield** is moving to a temporary site (for 1.5 years) as their current site gets redeveloped for both housing and shelter. That work will begin by the end of this year. The temporary site will retain the number of beds currently contracted.
- **Pittsfield (ServiceNet)** noted the number of families calling the individual shelter looking for shelter (a consequence of the current family shelter limits)
- **North Adams (Louison House)** is over-capacity (dining room has become shelter), but good news with a church in the area willing to create space for a warming center
- **Update on state resources:** the Legislature just passed a FY25 Supplemental Budget that included \$4 million for overflow winter shelter. HLC is working on bringing that

number up to \$12 million through additional resources. HLC will be reaching out to providers statewide when funds are actually available.

Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance (MHSA) Update (with thanks to Caitlin Golden, Director of Public Policy)

Caitlin reported out on MHSA's annual retreat earlier this week of providers statewide working on individual homelessness.

- Themes addressed: shelter capacity (lack thereof); winter planning; unsheltered homelessness; supportive housing; the intersection of health care resources and homelessness
- Possible areas for united statewide advocacy: addressing the workforce challenges, specifically around improving pay for front line workers (which in turn addresses the ability to increase shelter capacity); investing resources in organizing to combat community opposition to siting of shelters or supportive housing; advocacy to close the gaps between the "offerings" of new health resources (e.g, MassHealth medical respite, CSPECH, CSPI) and the actual ability to utilize them; addressing the rise in older adult homelessness, both among newly homeless and adults aging within the homelessness system; streamlining the funding sources needed to create supportive housing - making it quicker and less complicated so that it can happen! Next steps are for MHSA to synthesize this information, working with its advisory board to zero in on a few top priorities around which we can all organize over this coming year. The Network serves on the advisory board and will bring this discussion back to the region.

Family Shelter Update and Advocacy (with thanks to Kelly Turley, Associate Director, MA Coalition for the Homeless)

The time limits on use of the overflow centers - now named temporary respite sites - are discouraging families from sleeping there at all (under current rules, use of these sites for even one night automatically makes a family ineligible for EA shelter for 6 months). As a result, there are an increasing number of families living in places not meant for human habitation, e.g., outside T stops, at Logan Airport (although the Governor recently reaffirmed the ban on sleeping there). Currently, community and faith groups are scrambling for resources to keep families safe and some community members are opening their homes for temporary stays. These responses, while extremely admirable, do not begin to meet the need. There is continued advocacy to the Legislature to intervene to further invest in the EA system in order to keep families safe while seeking housing; and to eliminate the 5 day limit on overflow shelter and the punitive policy of banning families from shelter for 6 months if they stay there.

Statewide partners are organizing actions and visibilities (last Monday an action on the Boston Common was well attended with good media coverage). Get connected here: <https://www.mahomeless.org/protect-access-to-shelter>

To see upcoming virtual and in-person actions: <https://tinyurl.com/ea-event-rsvp>; and to join a low-volume email group on upcoming actions go here: <https://groups.google.com/u/1/g/ea-actions>

The Network will continue to relay updates and action opportunities on its blog - be sure to [subscribe here](#).

Next meeting date: Tuesday, October 22, 9 am