

Western MA Task Force for Housing First Meeting Minutes - 10/22/24

In attendance: roughly 55 partners, including state legislators, legislative aides, city and town staff and dozens of housing and homelessness service providers

Winter shelter planning updates

HLC's RFP: The Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (HLC) will be releasing its RFP this week to fund additional winter shelter beds and warming sites. It will be roughly \$9.2 million total available statewide. Applications will be received and funded on a rolling basis until funds are expended. All non-profits (not just current HLC providers) may apply; municipalities may apply as well in partnership with a local non-profit. Congregate and non-congregate shelter beds are allowable, as are warming sites, day and overnight. HLC's goal is to remain as flexible as possible to meet the need.

Tentative regional responses as of now:

We affirmed our commitment to coordinating the region's responses as much as possible to ensure maximum coverage and minimal (no!) duplication in services being proposed.

Current updates include:

Hampshire County: CSO, CHD and Craig's Doors met earlier this morning to begin the conversation around coordination.

- Craig's Doors will be applying for additional shelter capacity for the 2nd floor of the Econolodge in Hadley - still unclear how many beds, depending on estimated need (TBD in further conversation with partners).
- CHD is considering an application to fund hotel rooms at the Quality Inn in Northampton.
- CSO is considering seeking funding for 11 additional winter overflow beds at its new shelter site on Industrial Drive in Northampton BUT this is contingent on the opening (i.e., completion) of the new building, which will not be sooner than January.

Franklin County:

- CSO will not be able to expand its current shelter capacity in Greenfield due to the temporary shelter move (due to the renovation/housing development about to be underway at its current site). However, it currently has an additional 5 beds that are in "overflow" and they will seek funding to support the continuation of these beds.
- The Franklin County/North Quabbin Opioid Task Force is compiling a directory of warming and shelter sites across the region. Currently, they have listed 9 warming locations in Athol and 7 in Greenfield. They will be releasing this

resource list shortly for broad distribution. They will also be exploring in coalition additional prospects for HLC funding.

Berkshire County:

- ServiceNet is hoping to expand its capacity in Pittsfield, working closely with the city. Determining a location for expansion is the greatest challenge. Hoping to expand their warming center at minimum.
- Louison House in Northern Berkshires will also seek funding for additional beds at a local church and in hotels
- CHD will be running a daytime warming site in Pittsfield as well.

Hampden County:

- CSO is undergoing a renovation/expansion so will not be able to expand its current capacity (which is frequently already in overflow).
- CHD is considering applying for funding to expand capacity (double occupancy) at the Motel 6 in Holyoke. CHD will also be running a daytime warming center in Holyoke.

Additional Hampden County news:

- The Springfield-Hampden CoC has awarded CHD a \$1.5 million grant to provide rapid rehousing to people living unsheltered in the City of Springfield. This contract will hopefully be finalized and begin to be implemented in the next couple of weeks. The goal is to house people who would otherwise be living outside during the winter months (and to keep them housed beyond).
- The CoC has an RFP out to reallocate the approximately \$400,000 in rapid rehousing (RRH) funds that Catholic Charities previously had. These funds can be used for RRH throughout Hampden County and must be spent by June 30, 2025. The hope is for these funds to be utilized during the winter months as well.

Statewide Update: Joyce Tapon of the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance (MHSA) reported that unsheltered homelessness has increased substantially statewide. MHSA is sponsoring a strategy session on Wednesday, October 23, for providers to brainstorm responses to the current situation. Even with HLC's \$9.2 million in winter shelter funding, that amount is estimated to cover only 1 out of 3 people living outside. What else do we need to ask for to create meaningful and lasting responses to reduce unsheltered homelessness? How can the state help build and strengthen partnerships with municipalities, e.g.? More to discuss!

Family homelessness discussion

We had an extensive conversation about the impact of the state's new Emergency Assistance policies, setting a limit on shelter capacity and time limits and choices

between staying at a "Temporary Respite Center" for 5 days and being ineligible for family shelter for 6 months thereafter. All of these policies and new restrictions are having serious consequences for families in this region. Many anecdotes were shared of families sleeping in places not fit for human habitation - cars, abandoned buildings, parks. Providers are receiving a notable increase in calls for families in desperate need and having no recourse in the face of it.

The lack of access to HLC was also noted, especially in rural areas where cell service can be spotty and the only way to reach HLC is by phone (no physical office). People are on hold for over an hour and then close the call or are told they will get a call back and never do.

Then for families who do make contact and submit an application, it is frequently 3 or 4 weeks until a decision is made, which is an impossible timeline given the desperate condition these families are living in with their children. And then after that 3 or 4 week wait, there is frequently a denial.

Meanwhile, CHD noted that it has available family shelter beds that are not being filled despite repeated requests to HLC. It is a "closed referral system" (families can arrive only via HLC's determination of EA eligibility) so the beds remain empty.

Kelly Turley of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless shared that she understands that this is not a unique situation; there are available beds in other parts of the state. She noted that the EA budget line-item is facing an estimated \$400 million deficit this fiscal year (current funding slated to last until the end of January), which may be a factor in not filling beds.

The Legislature's EA Commission to study the family homelessness system continues to meet. There is a listening session for community based organizations and advocates **THIS Friday, October 25, 12-1:30 pm** - [please register here](#) and please attend to share your experience!

The group agreed to follow-up with legislators on the call to request a meeting with Secretary Augustus to bring attention to this family homelessness situation in western MA (special thanks to Rep. Saunders for getting the ball rolling on that). Pamela will reach out to legislators and partners about next steps.

We also noted the vital importance of simultaneously staying focused on upstream prevention programs in order to stem the flow of families into homelessness.

Next meeting date: Thursday, November 21, 9 am