



Housing First
for Hampden, Hampshire,
Franklin and Berkshire Counties

Western MA Network to End Homelessness Recommendations – November 18, 2024

The Western Massachusetts Network to End Homelessness seeks to prevent and end homelessness across the four western counties with a Housing First approach that centers racial equity. The Network convenes hundreds of partners – community providers across every sector, municipalities, legislators and people with lived experience – to coordinate efforts towards its shared mission.

We are grateful for this opportunity to bring to you the most pressing concerns from the region regarding the unprecedented rise in homelessness across all populations. Thank you for your continuing commitment and leadership.

Family homelessness observations and recommendations

- Center for Human Development has a significant number of empty hotel beds while families are sleeping unsheltered in our communities. We welcome a better understanding of this gap.
- Access to apply for Emergency Assistance in rural areas is especially challenging. Cell access can be difficult and wait times to apply on the phone can make access nearly impossible.
- The financial strain on city school systems and other basic services resulting from the increase in homelessness is immense. More resources are needed.
- Providers and municipalities request as timely as possible communication regarding policy changes and/or EA shelter moving into a community. Ready to partner!
- Moving HomeBASE and RAFT eligibility farther upstream will prevent more homelessness.
- The current EA time limits and shelter bans require a "one size fits all" approach that undercuts the shared goal of a trauma-centered approach.
- Due to restricted EA capacity, there is a marked increase in pregnant people entering the individual homelessness system. Interventions are needed.

Individual homelessness observations and recommendations:

- Adopt emergency orders to provide local control over variances on building codes in the event of extreme weather emergencies.
- In view of the marked increase in encampments, the intertwined housing and substance use/mental health challenges require increased collaboration and resource and data sharing between EOHHS (including MassHealth, DPH and DMH) and HLC. More active engagement from the Department of Public Health-Bureau of Substance Abuse (BSAS) would be especially timely.
- Invest substantially more in the successful model of permanent supportive housing (PSH), including flexible supportive housing funding that is accessible to smaller projects. We know this works!

For all: Provide a “community toolkit” with messaging and state/nationwide data support for local communities and/or providers facing zoning/siting challenges and community opposition