

Western MA Task Force for Housing First Meeting Minutes - 3/20/25

In attendance: roughly 70 Network partners, including state legislator, city and town staff, and dozens of housing and homelessness providers and advocates

Thanks to House Leader Carlos González and Senate Ways and Means Vice Chair Jo Comerford for sharing opening words. We appreciate their leadership and support!

Some take-aways:

- the House and Senate Joint Ways and Means Committee is holding its next public hearing on April 8 - in Boston with remote access. This is a crucial opportunity to submit testimony about our FY26 budget priorities. Pamela will provide more details shortly.
- Re: the Affordable Homes Act that was passed last Session: we need to stay engaged and vigilant to ensure the implementation is equitable and western MA gets its fair share
- Bills have been filed and sent to Joint Committees - hearings will come next - this is another crucial opportunity for us to show up and advocate for our legislative priorities.
- New rules to govern the House and Senate ways of doing business are in their final stages of being worked out in conference committee. They will provide more access and transparency. Stay tuned on their final adoption.

Update on federal funding

- Continuum of Care (CoC) funding: The region receives roughly \$13 million in federal homelessness dollars through its two Continuums of Care (Hampden County CoC; Three County - Hampshire, Franklin, Berkshire) CoC), \$9.3 million in Hampden; \$3.7 million in Three County. As of now, these federal dollars are expected to be distributed. They are currently held up due to a court order requiring removal of certain DEI-related language in the contract (that had been added by the current Administration but then challenged). This will hopefully be resolved shortly.
- Funding through the Continuing Resolution: homelessness programs have been level-funded as of now, but this will actually effectively equal a cut in services because of the cost of increasing rent.
- The MA Fair Housing Center received sudden notice of a cut of all of its federal funding, 52% of its budget. This is being challenged in court (along with other fair housing organizations across the country that received similar cuts). This will have a devastating impact on the ability to do fair housing work in the region. Maureen St. Cyr, the Executive Director, will keep us posted on ways the Network can support their efforts to stop the cuts and preserve services.

Access to Counsel Update

Special thanks to Jane Edmonstone and Mandy Winalski of Community Legal Aid for sharing an update on the implementation of the Access to Counsel pilot program in Western MA. The Legislature adopted this \$2.5 million pilot program in the FY25 budget (funds were just released in January). The MA Legal Assistance Corporation is overseeing its implementation through grants to legal aid programs across the state. Community Legal Aid (CLA) has been able to

utilize the funds to hire 2 FTE staff to provide representation to low-income tenants facing eviction. The priority areas are assisting tenants who are at risk of losing their public housing or housing subsidy or where large landlords are involved. Right now allocating resources to Hampden County since they are so limited (hoping to expand to other western MA counties with more resources).

Pamela noted that the Network's priorities include the request for \$5 million for FY26 to bolster the program further and adoption of the Access to Counsel bill to make the program permanent.

The Network's FY26 budget and 2025-2026 legislative priorities

Pamela updated the group on last week's legislative meetings between legislators and Network partners to discuss its [FY26 budget priorities](#) and [2025-2026 legislative priorities](#). Read all about it and see the photos [here](#).

Shelter Updates

- Craig's Doors (Amherst): ending winter bed capacity of 20 additional beds at the end of April; Resource Center is back in operation; workforce development program is off the ground.
- ServiceNet (Pittsfield): 40 bed shelter is always full; running warming center until the end of April with approx. 30 people every night
- Louison House (North Berkshires): running winter beds through the end of May
- CHD (Hampden County): Holyoke shelter always full; done with emergency hotel funds by 4/1; noted the loss of BSAS low-threshold temporary housing
- Franklin County Opioid Task Force (Greenfield/Franklin County): reported 594 overnight stays at the warming center; 50 hotel nights provided, use of 25 daytime warming centers
- Friends of the Homeless - CSO (Springfield, Northampton, Greenfield): all shelters full; hotel funds spent down; winter overflow beds - 7 in Springfield; 10 in Northampton, 5 in Greenfield - all funded until June 30; served over 200 individuals with overflow winter beds and hotel stays
- CSO noted the exceptional demand for shelter in Northampton and Greenfield - roughly 30 individuals in need of beds beyond capacity to serve
- Medical Respite: adding 3 or 4 beds with the utilization of MassHealth to reimburse

Good housing news: Gerry McCafferty celebrated the extraordinary collaboration of many partners in Hampden County, both to create 20 new permanent supportive housing units (via Home City Housing) and to create a city-funded program to house unsheltered people - utilizing a cross-section of health care and housing partners, along with an excellent collaboration with police outreach team. Helping to move the most vulnerable individuals off the street into housing.

Next meeting date: Tuesday, April 29