

ABCD Testimony to the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs- Community Based Organizations and Advocates Listening Session

October 25, 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance on behalf of Action for Boston Community Development, Inc., better known as ABCD. ABCD is one of 23 Community Action Agencies across Massachusetts. We serve over 100,000 individuals and families across Greater Boston, administering several federal and state programs.

As we have done in prior crises, ABCD has opened its doors to assist the recent arrivals and others needing shelter. Our network of 12 neighborhood sites across the city has been providing food, clothing, school supplies, and other supports to these families. Each of our 30+ Head Start centers has Emergency Assistance (EA) shelter families enrolled. While Head Start, a federal program, prides itself on providing essential wrap-around services in addition to child care, our Head Start staff have observed some troubling trends with respect to EA- involved families.

Families are unable to access the resources they need from EA shelter, hotels, and motels. There is a lack of communication from the EA system with non-profits and other service providers. It has been difficult for providers to determine whom to contact to offer resources and services, maintain contact with shelter and overflow sites, and provide support to enrolled families. While families enrolled in Head Start are able to access the myriad of resources available to them from ABCD, we are concerned the needs of families not enrolled in Head Start programs are not being adequately addressed.

Additionally, long-term plans need to be developed with resources to attain these goals. As you know, there have been severe delays in the issuing of work authorization for the recent arrivals. Though the federal government is taking steps to address this, there are still barriers to success for those who are permitted to work in the United States. Most workforce development programs require HiSet/ GED credentials and/or a certain level of fluency in English. Unfortunately, ESOL waitlists across the Commonwealth are very long, with some programs having waitlist of over 1.5 years. As a result, many migrants are left legally permitted to work without the capacity to obtain consistent, gainful employment.

Our Head Start employees also express concern about the mental health of the children we care for and their families who have recently arrived. Many of these people experienced trauma in their home countries and on their journeys to the United States. However, due to their immigration status, most are only eligible for (and can afford) MassHealth Limited. MassHealth Limited only covers 'emergency' visits—not ongoing mental health care. While some mental health services are available to families through Head Start, more is needed. And again, we are concerned about the mental health care needs of those not enrolled in Head Start who have experienced similar trauma.

ABCD also has a Housing department. As of now, approximately 8 families per day come into our Boston office requesting assistance with accessing shelter. While our housing advocates are able to help families apply for EA shelter, they, like Head Start, have experienced communication barriers with the EA system. Despite having signed releases from clients, EA will not speak to ABCD

staff or advocates about cases they are assigned to. Even though our staff notes that a person needs communication in a language other than English, all emails and notices go to the applicant in English. This delays the process of a family receiving shelter, as they cannot understand the notice and their advocate is unable to act on their behalf.

To add, the EA shelter system has a very specific view of what constitutes a family that often excludes extended family members such as grandparents that are integral parts of a family's ability to find and maintain stable housing. Our housing advocates have also found it particularly difficult to obtain support for people with disabilities and those who do not speak English well.

Our Head Start and Housing staff have shared the suggestions below.

1. More outreach should be done from entities operating EA shelters, hotels, motels, and overflow sites
2. EA shelter providers should respond to applications as they are received via email and make the process more accessible for advocates supporting clients. This includes sharing blank releases and including advocates in emails to clients.
3. Community organizations should receive regular training and updates on changes being made to the EA family system and HomeBASE programs in orders to advocate for families more effectively.
4. HomeBASE is not enough to cover the costs of rent in Greater Boston. HomeBASE should be increased to reflect the housing market and offered to those who can maintain tenancy and not as a away to decrease shelter numbers.
 - a. We have witnessed families being evicted despite receiving HomeBASE because it is not enough funding to cover costs. These families then find themselves in a worse position than before because they now have an eviction on their record, cannot access HomeBASE again, and their ability to access EA shelter is negatively impacted.
5. Community organizations should be allowed to administer rental vouchers and financial assistance funds. Many clients in Greater Boston struggle to connect with regional administering agencies, causing them to miss out on housing opportunities as they are not able to obtain funding in a timely manner.
6. Regional administering agencies should be partnered with community organizations to provide supportive services for programs like HomeBASE to ensure families are receiving holistic case management.
7. As part of the EA shelter application process, homelessness certificates from community organizations should be accepted, rather than requiring families to be assessed by a state agency.
 - a. We often have families waiting in our offices for hours for a state agency to verify that their living conditions are unsafe. Sometimes families will wait only for the state agency staff to not show up for the scheduled assessment.

We look forward to the opportunity to collaborate more actively with the EA shelter system and its families. ABCD remains ready and willing to provide the resources and assistance we have available to families in need. We hope that communication and information flows between the

system and community- based organizations will expand and remain open as we continue to address this ongoing crisis.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this testimony.