

November 7, 2024

Dear Secretary Walsh,

We are volunteers working with two organizations: Lexington Refugee Assistance Program (LEXRAP)¹ and LEXSHELTERED². We attended the EOHLC Virtual Listening Session for Community Based Organizations and Advocates on October 25, 2024. We would like to submit the following recommendations for consideration.

1. Award MRVP (Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program) vouchers to residents who receive 90 day exit notices, upon receipt of the exit notice. Additionally, give families extra time to find a unit. I believe typically, families awarded vouchers have 120 days to find a unit plus extensions. Stays in shelters should be aligned with the ability to utilize the MRVP vouchers.
2. Increase and adjust HomeBASE by family/unit size. In the Boston Metro area, HomeBASE does not provide enough funding to cover the difference between Fair Market Rents charged by many affordable housing programs and 30% of a family's income. This year FMR set at \$2827 for a two bedroom and \$3,418 for a three bedroom. Even if you can find a 3 bedroom for \$3000, the math doesn't work for most families. Assuming a family might have an income of \$60,000/yr 30% of that is \$1500/month. Adding on the ey\$1250.month maximum from HomeBASE only comes to \$2750, below even the two-bedroom FMR. This doesn't even take into account any assistance HomeBASE would give towards first month's, last month's and or security deposit. Quite possibly HomeBASE might be asking families to pay >30% of their gross income in rent which is extremely burdensome and not helpful when you're thinking about stabilization of families.
3. If not already doing so, allow families utilizing HomeBASE to concurrently utilize RAFT. If concurrent use is permitted, RAFT might pay towards first month's, last month's and security deposit and HomeBASE could be used to supplement monthly rent at higher levels.
4. Prohibit 90 day Exit Notices in shelters where staffing issues exist. Some shelters have never hired the full complement of caseworkers and housing case managers specified in their contract. Additionally, there seems to be massive rates of turnover where staff stay less than 3 months, 6 months etc. Due to the ramp up time for new employees and the understaffing overall, families living in these understaffed shelters should not be penalized due to inability of shelters to provide adequate case management services. EOHLC should evaluate each shelter's staffing and prohibit HomeBASE/shelters from issuing Exit Notices if staffing has been below a certain threshold.

We respectfully submit these comments on our own behalf.

Sincerely,

Mary Diaz-Przybyl, Volunteer, Board Member and Treasurer, LEXRAP
Lynn Wolfsfeld, Volunteer Housing Coordinator, LEXRAP

¹LEXRAP is an all-volunteer, Lexington-based 501(c)(3) non-profit organization founded in 2015 to help refugees and asylum seekers settle in the United States. LEXRAP assists families with education, housing, healthcare, employment, household goods, socialization, summer camp, temporary financial assistance, and transportation. The refugees and asylum seekers we work with are from Afghanistan, Cuba, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jamaica, Rwanda, Syria, Uganda, and Ukraine.

²LEXSHELTERED is a coalition of individuals, non-profits and faith groups, primarily in Lexington Massachusetts. LEXSHELTERED was formed in October 2023 to support the migrants living in the Lexington Shelters. Volunteers have helped with English Language Learning, employment, driving lessons, housing applications, child care vouchers and preschool applications.