

SPECIAL COMMISSION ON EMERGENCY HOUSING ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

August 19, 2024
1:00 pm – 2:30 pm

John W. McCormack Building
21st Floor Conference Room
1 Ashburton Place, Boston MA

MEETING MINUTES

A meeting of the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs was held on Monday, August 19, 2024, in person and via Zoom.

The following Commission members were present in person:

- **Lt. Governor Kimberley Driscoll**, Commission Chair
- **Sec. Edward Augustus**, Secretary of Housing and Livable Communities
- **Sec. Kate Walsh**, Secretary of Health and Human Services
- **Adit Basheer**, Deputy Director, Emergency Assistance Incident Command, as designee of Sec. Matthew Gorzkowicz, Secretary of Administration and Finance
- **Susan Church**, Chief Operating Officer, Office for Immigrants and Refugees, as designee of Cristina Aguilera Sandoval, Executive Director, Office for Immigrants and Refugees
- **Sen. Robyn Kennedy**, Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities
- **Leah Bradley**, Executive Director, Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance
- **Lyndia Downie**, President & Executive Director, Pine Street Inn

The following Commission members attended via Zoom:

- **Rep. Paul Frost**, Second Assistant Minority Leader
- **Sen. Ryan Fattman**, Assistant Minority Leader

The following Commission members were not in attendance:

- **Sen. Lydia Edwards**, Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Housing
- **Rep. James Arciero**, House Chair, Joint Committee on Housing
- **Pastor Dieufort Fleurissant**, President & Executive Director, True Alliance Center

Members reviewed or discussed the following materials:

- A slide deck, which has been posted at <https://www.mass.gov/doc/ea-commission-august-2024-slides-0/download>

- Minutes from the July 18, 2024 meeting, which have been posted at <https://www.mass.gov/doc/emergency-assistance-ea-commission-july-18-meeting-minutes/download>

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1. INTRODUCTION

Lieutenant Governor Driscoll opened the meeting at 1:03 pm. The Lieutenant Governor noted that Rep. Frost and Sen. Fattman were attending by Zoom and that Sec. Gorkowicz and Cristina Aguilera Sandoval were represented by designees.

The Lieutenant Governor provided an overview of the agenda and goals for the meeting, highlighting the importance of fiscal and operational sustainability for the Emergency Assistance (“EA”) system.

2. TEMPORARY RESPITE CENTER MODEL

Adit Basheer explained that the EA program had a deficiency for the current fiscal year and was projected to have an approximately \$700 million deficiency in FY26 and FY27. Basheer provided an overview of changes made to the EA system and related programs over the past year.

Sec. Walsh provided an overview of recent changes under which additional families are prioritized for placement in EA shelter and families awaiting placement have the option of staying for five days (with possible extensions) in Temporary Respite Centers (“TRCs”), at which they will receive short-term shelter and diversion supports. Sec. Walsh explained that 200 families had received notice of their exit date from TRCs, and some had received extensions.

The Lieutenant Governor invited questions. Rep. Frost asked where families exiting TRCs are going. The Lieutenant Governor and Sec. Walsh explained that exiting families transition into stable housing through support programs like HomeBASE, go to stay with family members or friends, travel to other states, or receive support from nonprofits or churches. The Lieutenant Governor explained that TRCs are separate from EA shelters, and that these changes are directed at being able to provide short-term shelter for families coming into the system.

Sen. Kennedy asked whether all families entering TRCs are new arrivals to Massachusetts. Basheer explained that most, but not all, families in TRCs are new arrivals. Sen. Kennedy highlighted the importance of attention to where families exiting TRCs are going and the costs imposed on other systems/municipalities.

Sen. Fattman asked who makes decisions regarding extensions of time in TRCs. Basheer explained that providers make decisions based on day-to-day engagement with families.

Sen. Kennedy asked which providers manage TRC sites. Basheer provided an overview of TRC site providers.

Leah Bradley asked how TRCs handle families with imminent housing that begins after their exit date. Basheer explained that those families may receive extensions.

3. SUPPORT FOR DIVERSIONS AND EXITS

Sec. Augustus provided an overview of efforts to support families in finding alternatives to EA shelter, including through HomeBASE, reticketing, and support in finding employment. He presented data showing that enrollments in HomeBASE, work authorizations, employment, and monthly exits from shelter have risen since summer 2023. The Lieutenant Governor noted that prior to the recent rise in demand, some families were staying in shelter for extended periods of time, and that recent changes have been directed at providing appropriate case management.

Sen. Fattman asked about the breakdown of families receiving HomeBASE support. The Lieutenant Governor and Sec. Augustus explained that families receiving HomeBASE generally have an income stream, which could include employment, Social Security, or veterans benefits.

Rep. Frost asked what supports were part of the \$1 billion total cost for EA, whether families exiting EA will create greater strain on subsidized housing, and whether families exit for market rate housing. Sec. Augustus said that current EA expenditures include costs for housing, food, service providers, etc., and that the housing market overall is tight, with a 1.6% vacancy rate, but that some families do exit for market rate housing.

Leah Bradley shared her experience as a HomeBASE provider, noting the different circumstances presented by long-term residents and new arrivals, and the importance of minimizing barriers so that property owners will participate in HomeBASE.

Sen. Kennedy asked who makes determinations on eligibility for diversion supports, how the program ensures that families are in healthy situations, and whether there are barriers to extending HomeBASE and allocating funds more rapidly. Sec. Augustus explained that HLC employees make eligibility determinations and that funds are available of up to \$45,000 over three years. Susan Church and Leah Bradley noted that landlords have had concerns about whether a resident can continue paying rent after three years.

The Lieutenant Governor noted that it was important to continue to reform the HomeBASE program to meet families' needs, to place families on a path to independence through public housing and other strategies, and to reduce reliance on sheltering families in hotels.

4. LONG-TERM SYSTEM PLANNING

Adit Basheer presented data on the EA caseload since 2017, noting that caseload approximately doubled in 2023, that length of stay has declined since 2021, and that costs have increased from approximately \$200 million to \$1 billion. Leah Bradley noted that the COVID-19 pandemic affected these numbers. Basheer explained that the \$1 billion cost is driven largely by rising caseload, with relatively smaller increases attributable to increased supports. He explained that the system had an FY25 deficiency of \$500m and that the system is projected to run out of funds on January 1, 2025.

The Lieutenant Governor emphasized that the current system is unsustainable, and explained that there was a short-term need to manage current deficiencies and a long-term need—the focus of the Commission—to plan for the long-run sustainability of the EA system. The Lieutenant

Governor said placement in EA shelter should be rare, brief, and non-recurring, with a focus on prevention, case management, and pathways to stable housing.

5. DISCUSSION OF LONG-TERM SYSTEM PLANNING

Sen. Kennedy said that the shelter system has been broken for a long time, with providers doing good work but a need for a different approach. She emphasized the importance of taking a new approach that includes regional decision-making, with decisions about families made by those interacting with families. She cautioned against restrictions that impose costs elsewhere and harm families. She encouraged a focus on connecting families with appropriate services and supports, including HomeBASE and Section 8.

Rep. Frost suggested making legislative changes, codifying both the prioritization and TRC policies that went into effect August 1 and further limits on EA shelter. He said those changes should include residency requirements, and that the current approach is causing continued demand, rising costs, and program bottlenecks.

Lyndia Downie discussed a recent report that found that Massachusetts had a high per capita rate of homeless with a significant percentage of homeless families, and suggested assessing how and why Massachusetts data differs from other states. Leah Bradley said that it may be easier to count homeless families in Massachusetts because they are in shelter. The Lieutenant Governor said it was important to consider apples-to-apples data and to assess how the state can make best use of resources.

Sen. Kennedy expressed pride in the state for having a focused conversation on addressing homelessness. She noted that the EA system began as a welfare program detached from long-term housing services. She noted that over time, both HomeBASE and EA have had additional restrictions imposed in response to rising demand, and that the result of such restrictions has been that costs are imposed elsewhere. She noted that new arrivals can fulfill the need of Massachusetts industries for employees.

Leah Bradley encouraged focusing on the outcomes we seek for children and removing barriers that prevent property owners from leasing to homeless families.

The Lieutenant Governor noted that key themes of the conversation included looking at data and making best use of limited resources, and that there was broad alignment on values.

The Lieutenant Governor entertained a motion to approve the July 18 meeting minutes. Sec. Augustus, with Sen. Kennedy seconding, so moved. The minutes were unanimously approved by roll call vote, with Sec. Augustus, Sec. Walsh, Adit Basheer, Susan Church, Sen. Kennedy, Rep. Frost, Sen. Fattman, Leah Bradley, and Lyndia Downie voting in favor.

The Lieutenant Governor entertained a motion to adjourn. Sec. Augustus, with Sec. Walsh seconding, so moved. Adjournment was unanimously approved by roll call vote, with Sec. Augustus, Sec. Walsh, Adit Basheer, Susan Church, Sen. Kennedy, Rep. Frost, Sen. Fattman, Leah Bradley, and Lyndia Downie voting in favor. The meeting adjourned at 2:23 pm.