

SPECIAL COMMISSION ON EMERGENCY HOUSING ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

November 12, 2024
10:00 am – 11:30 am

Massachusetts State House, Room 157
24 Beacon St., Boston MA

MEETING MINUTES

A meeting of the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs was held on Tuesday, November 12, 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
- **Sec. Matthew Gorzkowicz**, Secretary of Administration and Finance
- **Cristina Aguilera Sandoval**, Executive Director, Office for Immigrants and Refugees
- **Rep. Jay Livingstone**, House Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities
- **Sen. Robyn Kennedy**, Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities
- **Leah Bradley**, Chief Executive Officer, Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance
- **Lyndia Downie**, President & Executive Director, Pine Street Inn
- **Pastor Dieufort Fleurissant**, President & Executive Director, True Alliance Center

The following Commission members attended in part via Zoom and in part in person:

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

The following Commission members attended via Zoom:

- **Rep. James Arciero**, House Chair, Joint Committee on Housing
- **Sen. Lydia Edwards**, Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Housing

Members reviewed or discussed the following materials:

- A slide deck, which has been posted at <https://www.mass.gov/doc/ea-commision-presentation-nov-12-2024/download>
- Minutes from the October 15, 2024 meeting, which have been posted at <https://www.mass.gov/doc/ea-commision-meeting-minutes-october-15/download>

- A draft Report of the Special Commission on Emergency Housing Assistance Programs, which has been posted at <https://www.mass.gov/doc/report-of-the-special-commission-on-emergency-housing-assistance-programs-draft-111224/download>

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Lieutenant Governor opened the meeting at 10:11 am. The Lieutenant Governor called a roll call to identify members attending in person and via Zoom. Sec. Augustus, Sec. Gorzkowicz, Sec. Walsh, Cristina Aguilera Sandoval, Sen. Fattman, Sen. Kennedy, Rep. Livingstone, Pastor Fleurissaint, Leah Bradley, and Lyndia Downie were present in person. Rep. Arciero and Rep. Frost were attending by Zoom. Sen. Edwards was not present at the time of the roll call.

The Lieutenant Governor entertained a motion to approve the October 15, 2024 meeting minutes. Sec. Augustus, with Rep. Livingstone seconding, so moved. The minutes were unanimously approved by roll call vote.

The Lieutenant Governor provided an overview of the agenda and goals for the meeting, including sharing takeaways from the listening sessions and discussing the draft Commission report.

II. READOUT OF LISTENING SESSIONS

The Lieutenant Governor said the recent listening sessions had seen strong turnout, including from providers, advocates, families, and municipalities, and that a summary of feedback was included in the report. The Lieutenant Governor outlined key themes of feedback as including the importance of prevention and diversion through tools like Rental Assistance for Families in Transition (“RAFT”) and HomeBASE, supportive housing with wraparound services, using data to inform practice, and accounting for family needs.

Sen. Kennedy proposed including written submissions as an appendix to the Commission report. The Lieutenant Governor agreed that such submissions could be included.

Rep. Livingstone noted concerns raised at a listening session regarding receiving and understanding notices. Chris Thompson (Undersecretary of Housing Stabilization, Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities) explained that these concerns may have involved other government programs outside the EA system, and outlined ongoing efforts to provide translated documents. Leah Bradley noted that whenever new processes are introduced, it’s important to explain and set clear expectations; for example, explaining to families the process and timeline for finding housing. The Lieutenant Governor agreed on the importance of communicating clearly and in the appropriate language.

III. REVIEW OF DRAFT REPORT, FINDINGS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Lieutenant Governor began to outline the draft Commission report, noting that the report is due December 1. (The Lieutenant Governor said that there were issues with Zoom access, and

asked Commission members to hold further comments until access was restored. Shortly thereafter, the Lieutenant Governor said access had been restored and the meeting could continue.) The Lieutenant Governor noted that key themes outlined in the report include making family homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring; avoiding a one-size-fits-all system; and ensuring the system is operationally and fiscally sustainable. Rep. Frost, who had been attending via Zoom, joined in person.

The Lieutenant Governor and Sec. Gorzkowicz outlined the system's finances: \$1.094b in project costs for FY 2025, with need for supplemental appropriations given \$426m in additional need for FY 2025 and needs for FY 2026 that will go beyond the funds available from the Transitional Escrow Fund. Sec. Gorzkowicz noted that the report summarizes areas of increased investment in recent years, including the RAFT and HomeBASE programs and other exit strategies.

Leah Bradley noted that moving to other forms of housing can be time-consuming, describing efforts to move families from hotels to co-shelter.

Lyndia Downie asked how many families are served by the system in total given the 7,500-family capacity at any point time. The Lieutenant Governor explained that thousands of families had moved through the system in some form and been connected to employment and housing. Chris Thompson said the EA system has never served more people over the course of a year than at present. Sec. Augustus said that monthly exits have increased to approximately 450 families.

Sen. Kennedy proposed adding a recommendation to provide for a body that continues to meet to explore the issues addressed by the Commission, which could be the Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness or some other body to be named later. She noted that it was important to be strategic in implementing recommendations, and to avoid repeating past efforts that have ultimately imposed additional costs. Sen. Fattman noted that he had filed an amendment to extend the deadline for the Commission's work, noting that ensuring recommendations were sustainable is a key question. The Lieutenant Governor agreed that it was important to address the system's financial challenges, and said the Commission's charge was to lay out principles for a sustainable system.

Sen. Fattman suggested putting into law existing measures taken through executive authority. Lyndia Downie noted the importance of careful planning and advance notice in transitioning families out of shelter, describing success in placing individuals who were sheltered in a hotel after sufficient notice and case management. The Lieutenant Governor agreed that setting expectations and providing services and opportunities was important, especially given the challenges of the housing market.

Rep. Frost said it was important to address the cause of the rise in demand for shelter, and the rise of applicants for shelter coming from out of state. He proposed focusing the system on families that are already in Massachusetts and limiting out-of-state applicants.

The Lieutenant Governor said she welcomed suggestions for the report and noted that the Commission's charge had three aspects: the sustainability and effectiveness of the system, how

best to support the long-term sufficiency of those seeking shelter, and a regional based response to support families. She said the draft report addressed those directives and that operationalizing those recommendations would be a subsequent step, and that the legislature could further consider legislation.

Sen. Kennedy said the shelter system has long been broken, and that there were better ways to serve families and provide access to housing and supports. She said the system shouldn't focus on limitations, and that the focus should be on getting people appropriate supports and services and building a smarter, more efficient, compassionate system.

Rep. Frost departed the meeting. The Lieutenant Governor noted that Sen. Edwards had joined the meeting by Zoom.

Sec. Augustus summarized the draft report's recommendations on operational sustainability, diversions/exits, and limiting reliance on hotels and motels. He said it was important to improve ratios of caseworkers to families and support diversion and rapid exits into sustainable housing. Sec. Augustus explained that the goal is preventing families from needing the EA system, supporting families in staying in current housing and addressing needs like work authorization, access to jobs, and skills training. Leah Bradley noted that important work has been done on HomeBASE, and highlighted the importance of investing in and making accessible the RAFT and HomeBASE programs. Sec. Augustus said that reducing reliance on hotels would be more fiscally sustainable and better for families.

Sen. Fattman said he would be exiting the room but joining the meeting by Zoom.

The Lieutenant Governor summarized the draft report's recommendations on setting clear expectations and assessing family needs. Sen. Kennedy said there was a tension between avoiding a one-size-fits-all model and setting length of stay limits. The Lieutenant Governor and Sec. Walsh said the goal was to assess family needs and set clear expectations. Sen. Kennedy said it was important to continue engaging with experts and stakeholders on the right approach and to avoid policies that conflict.

Sec. Augustus summarized the draft report's recommendations on improving regional shelter management and increasing affordable housing access. He said taking a regional approach has been successful, responding to variations in housing markets and working with local partners. The Lieutenant Governor highlighted the importance of the availability of sustainable housing.

The Lieutenant Governor summarized the draft report's final recommendation, collecting and using data to inform practice on the ground. Rep. Frost returned to the meeting in person. The Lieutenant Governor noted that the report recommends continuing to provide updates and data on the implementation of recommendations.

Pastor Fleurissant highlighted the challenges families face in providing housing, but noted that many families have been able to connect with housing and that it was important to build close partnerships with cities and towns, meet family needs, and build affordable housing.

Sen. Edwards said that the report points in a good direction and emphasized the importance of addressing the lack of housing units in the state. She said she hoped that a working group could build on these recommendations with legislative solutions and funding opportunities. She recommended consulting with other states that are facing similar challenges.

The Lieutenant Governor noted that she was hearing support for what's in the report in broad principles, with the addition of a recommendation per Sen. Kennedy's proposal regarding how to continue the work of the Commission. Sen. Kennedy said that this report could set the stage for a subsequent group like the Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness.

Rep. Frost said that limits on and eligibility for shelter are worthy of debate and discussion. He expressed concern that the system could not both expand eligibility and reduce costs, and said he would share further recommendations. The Lieutenant Governor said the Commission's goal was to capture principles that will guide the EA system going forward, and that the legislature may wish to take up further legislative solutions. Rep. Frost noted the work of past commissions that have made legislative recommendations. The Lieutenant Governor and Sec. Walsh said the report was intended to build consensus around principles that will build a sustainable system.

The Lieutenant Governor invited additional comments from Commission members and said the Commission would meet again on Tuesday, November 19, at 2:00 pm to vote on a revised report, which would be shared in advance of the meeting. Sec. Gorzkowicz departed.

IV. MEETING CLOSING

The Lieutenant Governor entertained a motion to adjourn. Rep. Livingstone, with Sec. Augustus seconding, so moved. The motion was unanimously approved by roll call vote. The meeting adjourned at 11:33 am.