

SPECIAL COMMISSION ON EMERGENCY HOUSING ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

September 16, 2024

1:00 pm – 2:30 pm

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 Monday, September 16, 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
- **Cristina Aguilera Sandoval**, Executive Director, Office for Immigrants and Refugees
- **Rep. James Arciero**, House Chair, Joint Committee on Housing
- **Sen. Robyn Kennedy**, Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities
- **Rep. Jay Livingstone**, House Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities
- **Rep. Paul Frost**, Second Assistant Minority Leader
- **Sen. Ryan Fattman**, Assistant Minority Leader
- **Leah Bradley**, Executive Director, Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance
- **Lyndia Downie**, President & Executive Director, Pine Street Inn

The following Commission members attended via Zoom:

- **Sec. Matthew Gorzkowicz**, Secretary of Administration and Finance¹
- **Pastor Dieufort Fleurissant**, President & Executive Director, True Alliance Center

The following Commission member was not in attendance:

- **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/presentation-emergency-assistance-ea-commission-meeting-september-16-2024/download>

¹ Due to technology issues, Sec. Gorzkowicz attended via Zoom but did not participate in votes or discussion.

- Minutes from the August 19, 2024 meeting, which have been posted at <https://www.mass.gov/doc/emergency-assistance-ea-commission-august-19-meeting-minutes/download>

* * *

1. INTRODUCTION

Lieutenant Governor Driscoll opened the meeting at 1:07 pm. The Lieutenant Governor called a roll call to identify members attending in person and remote. Pastor Fleurissaint was participating by Zoom, and the Lieutenant Governor noted that Sec. Gorzkowicz would join by Zoom. Sec. Augustus joined in person and Sec. Gorzkowicz joined by Zoom shortly thereafter. Sen. Edwards was unable to join.

The Lieutenant Governor provided an overview of the agenda and goals for the meeting, including discussing work authorization and employment, temporary respite centers, and long-term system planning. She emphasized the importance of long-term planning and sustainability.

2. WORK AUTHORIZATION & EMPLOYMENT

Emergency Assistance (“EA”) Program Deputy Director Adit Basheer provided an overview of data and recent initiatives on work authorization, including the rising number of individuals who have received work authorization and the rising number who are employed or in job training programs. Sen. Fattman asked how work authorization was defined. Basheer explained that it meant federal authorization to work.

Sec. Walsh noted that EA residents were enthusiastic about employment and training opportunities. Leah Bradley noted the importance of supporting families in obtaining and maintaining work authorization and applying for asylum. She said she has seen families getting jobs at Amazon, Walmart, and other employers.

Rep. Livingstone asked about the length of training programs and work authorizations. Basheer said programs vary in length, and that residents can do other jobs while participating. Cristina Aguilera Sandoval explained that the length of work authorization depends on status.

Bradley noted that families with income over 150% of the poverty line for six months are required to exit. Rep. Frost asked about the income level for residents with jobs. Bradley said income varies, with some jobs full-time and some part-time, and often was not enough to pay rent but could be used with HomeBASE. The Lieutenant Governor noted the importance of connecting with employers in each region and providing responsive training programs.

Pastor Fleurissaint said work authorizations can be several years long, providing stability for families. Sandoval said the length of work authorization was an early concern for employers, but more recently they have seen longer work authorizations.

Rep. Frost asked about the costs of EA residents who exit but cannot afford market rate housing. The Lieutenant Governor explained that housing affordability is a challenge, and that exiting families may double up or may benefit from available supports that are in the existing budget.

Rep. Livingstone asked whether exiting families continue to receive support. The Lieutenant Governor and Sec. Augustus explained that families receive case management.

The Lieutenant Governor noted that some attendees were standing and invited them to sit.

Sen. Fattman asked how many individuals are eligible for work authorization. Sandoval explained the vast majority of new arrivals are eligible, but not all have received work authorization, and that eligibility and length can vary by status.

3. TEMPORARY RESPITE CENTER MODEL & METRICS

Sec. Walsh explained that the goal of the new temporary respite center (“TRC”) model is to move families out of shelter and into stable housing. She explained that initial data showed progress in families exiting for safe, permanent housing, with support from HomeBASE and other services. The Lieutenant Governor explained that under the prior overflow site model, the system was running out of money and capacity, and there wasn’t space for new arrivals, and that under the new model, families receive intensive case management so they can be housed rapidly.

Sen. Fattman left the meeting.

Sen. Kennedy noted the importance of ensuring that families are exiting into safe, stable housing, including by following up to ensure families aren’t being abused or taken advantage of. Sec. Walsh, Sec. Augustus, Basheer, and Allison Bovell-Ammon (Executive Office of Health and Human Services Director of Policy, Children & Family Services) explained that families are screened for domestic violence and child abuse; that families receive intensive case management and have a point of contact after exiting; that families are connected with regional services including schools, public benefits, and other services; and that families receiving HomeBASE receive two years of stabilization services. Sen. Kennedy noted that imposing restrictions in one part of the system can impose costs elsewhere, such as emergency rooms.

Pastor Fleurissant noted that providers build relationships with landlords of exiting families and visit apartments to facilitate additional services. The Lieutenant Governor emphasized the importance of service providers working in partnership with landlords.

Sen. Fattman asked about the costs of the HomeBASE program. Sec. Augustus explained the program provides a limited amount of money to assist with items such as first and last month’s rent, move-in costs, and furnishings, and that over time, families cover a greater share of rent.

4. LONG-TERM SYSTEM PLANNING

The Lieutenant Governor outlined key principles of ensuring that EA shelter is rare, brief, and non-recurring. She noted the importance of meeting families’ individual needs and ensuring financial sustainability. She outlined changes made in the past 18 months to set priorities and respond to individual family needs. She explained that key system levers include the needs assessment, the service delivery model, the length of stay policy, and diversion and exit tools.

Sen. Kennedy noted feedback from the Providers’ Council and United Way, and that there was a history of initially promising models losing focus and funding. She agreed with the principles of

shelter being brief, rare, and non-recurring, and noted that those goals are best achieved by meeting family needs rather than imposing restrictions. She noted that programs like Rental Assistance for Families in Transition (“RAFT”) and HomeBASE both meet family needs and save the Commonwealth money in the long run.

Bradley agreed regarding the importance of tailoring support to family needs. She noted the importance of working with landlords and addressing their needs, and said programs like RAFT can keep families in their homes for less cost than other programs. She emphasized that families should receive support through the right systems and agencies.

Rep. Arciero noted the enormity of the challenges facing the EA program, and that he sees cause for optimism in the rising numbers of residents receiving work authorization. The Lieutenant Governor noted ongoing work to expedite work authorization and connect residents with job training and placement. Rep. Livingstone agreed the system was in a better place than a year ago and on the opportunity to address state workforce shortages. He noted the importance of improving data collection and procurement systems.

Rep. Frost noted that the rise of new arrivals had driven challenges, and suggested addressing in law eligibility for EA benefits. He noted that when EA residents exit, they are competing with others for available housing, and suggested further discussion of prioritizing long-term residents.

The Lieutenant Governor noted the Commission’s legislative mandate to ensure long-term sustainability. The Lieutenant Governor and Sec. Augustus highlighted efforts by the legislature and Administration to expand housing supply. Sandoval noted the common themes of challenges and opportunity, and that immigration benefits the state.

5. ENGAGING EXTERNAL PARTNERS

The Lieutenant Governor outlined plans to hold listening sessions with groups including providers, community-based organizations and advocates, municipalities, and families. Bradley agreed on the importance of families, and proposed including developers and property owners. The Lieutenant Governor explained that a single commissioner would take the lead and report back, with others invited to attend.

Sen. Kennedy suggested beginning work on the report. The Lieutenant Governor agreed that the Commission should begin outlining what the report should include.

6. CLOSING

The Lieutenant Governor entertained a motion to approve the August 19 meeting minutes. Sec. Augustus, with Lyndia Downie seconding, so moved. The minutes were unanimously approved by roll call vote, with Sec. Augustus, Sec. Walsh, Sandoval, Rep. Arciero, Sen. Kennedy, Rep. Livingstone, Rep. Frost, Bradley, Downie, and Pastor Fleurissant voting in favor.

The Lieutenant Governor entertained a motion to adjourn. Sec. Augustus, with Rep. Livingstone seconding, so moved. Adjournment was unanimously approved by roll call vote, with Sec. Augustus, Sec. Walsh, Sandoval, Rep. Arciero, Sen. Kennedy, Rep. Livingstone, Rep. Frost, Bradley, Downie, and Pastor Fleurissant voting in favor. The meeting adjourned at 2:31 pm.