January 4, 2019

Dear colleagues,

On behalf of the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), I am pleased to share with you the following memorandum outlining the state of the Emergency Assistance (EA) procurement process and introduce a series of questions as part of this Request for Information. Thank you for the work you all do to address family homelessness in Massachusetts and for your insights into how the EA system can be strengthened.

This RFI cover memo includes the following sections:

**I.**      **Introduction**
**II.**      **Purpose and Background**: An overview of the procurement opportunity, feedback received from stakeholders to date, and data on the EA system.
**III.**      **Areas of Interest for Additional Input**: Based on the feedback received and data analyzed to date, the thematic areas that DHCD would like additional feedback on in this RFI.

In the RFI document, you will find:

**IV.**      **Questions**: Questions for RFI respondents, grouped around the thematic areas of interest outlined in Section III.
**V.**      **Instructions for Submission**

We look forward to responses from *all* stakeholders in the EA system. Responses are due February 15, 2019.

Sincerely,


Jane Banks
Assistant Undersecretary
Division of Housing Stabilization
Department of Housing and Community Development

### I.        Introduction

The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) is releasing this Request for Information (RFI) to seek input from stakeholders about improvements to the Emergency Assistance (EA) family shelter system. This RFI comes in advance of a Request for Responses (RFR), which is expected to be released in 2019. Current contracts are eligible for renewal through June 2021. The new contracts will become effective in July 2021.

DHCD envisions an EA system that prevents families from becoming homeless, safely shelters families for whom homelessness is unavoidable, works to quickly find stable and sustainable housing for families in shelter, supports families in their transition into the community, and connects families with the services and supports they need. Consistent with a Housing First approach, DHCD believes that families can best address their needs when they are in their own homes.

The questions have been designed to give stakeholders an opportunity to reiterate key points made during recent Listening Sessions and to further inform DHCD in identifying opportunities to introduce systems improvements in conjunction with the procurement.

DHCD welcomes responses to this RFI from EA providers, as well as stakeholders in the community, including but not limited to healthcare providers, service providers who serve homeless families, advocates, families who have used EA services, Continuums of Care, researchers, and other community stakeholders.

**This RFI is optional, and respondents do not need to answer all questions. <u>No awards will be made based on responses to this RFI.</u> Response to this RFI in whole or part is not required to be eligible for bidding on the RFR.**

### II.        Purpose and Background

*EA System Overview*

DHCD administers the Emergency Assistance (EA) program to assist families with emergency housing crises.  The EA program provides eligible families with temporary emergency shelter, case management, housing placement, and stabilization services. To be determined EA eligible, a family must meet certain categorical and financial eligibility requirements.[1] Approximately 3,600 families are sheltered in the EA system at a given time across a network of 45 providers. Less than one percent of families are currently sheltered in motels. Homeless individual adults are served by a separate system and are not the focus of this RFI.

*Procurement Opportunity*

This procurement—the first since 2008, and the first since the EA system moved from the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) to DHCD—is a vital opportunity to identify new approaches and bolster existing models to strengthen the EA system. This RFI forms part of a year-long engagement process with

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[1] Information regarding EA eligibility is available here: https://www.mass.gov/how-to/find-emergency-family-shelter

EA stakeholders. Throughout this consultation process, DHCD has been particularly interested in stakeholders' insights into:

- The goals the EA system should seek to accomplish;
- The range of services—both new and existing—that can meet those goals;
- The organization and coordination of the EA-funded continuum of services and other Commonwealth-funded services;
- The EA funding structure, and how best to recognize and reward the achievement of key outcomes.

*Learning to Date*

Over the past six months, DHCD has conducted listening sessions with key stakeholders, including families in the EA system, EA providers, advocates, state and local government agencies, continuums of care, and researchers.

Stakeholders highlighted some recent successes in the current system, including virtually eliminating family street homelessness; connecting eligible families with diversion funds to stay safely housed and avoid unsheltered homelessness; transitioning families from motels into shelters and permanent housing that can better serve their needs; and developing "mixed portfolios", where providers managed a mix of congregate, co-shelter, and scattered site,[2] allowing families to be placed in a setting that matched their needs.

Despite these strengths, providers and stakeholders alike consistently expressed a major challenge: **placing families in shelter into permanent housing—and keeping them housed post-shelter—is growing increasingly difficult.** They highlighted various factors contributing to this, including:

- **Increasingly Severe Cases:** Families entering EA appear to be facing more significant barriers, including unmet mental health needs, than at the time of the last procurement.
- **Provider Capacity – Family Need Mismatch:** Providers cannot meet all family needs and face cost and availability challenges when attempting to connect families with appropriate supports elsewhere in the community.
- **Lack of Cross-Agency Case Management:** Families that are involved in multiple state systems—or would benefit from additional services—face siloed case management instead of coordinated care between state and non-profit entities.
- **Challenging Housing Market:** Compared to the last procurement 10 years ago, housing throughout the Commonwealth is far more expensive and far more limited, making exits from shelter increasingly challenging.
- **Post-Shelter Housing Stabilization an Incomplete Solution:** Families leaving shelter face considerable barriers to staying stably housed, and in some cases, current stabilization efforts are not successful in ensuring long-term stable housing.

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[2] **Scattered** sites are individual apartments in the community owned or leased by shelter providers. Families either come into a provider's central office for case management services or receive home visits. **Congregate** sites, meanwhile, are generally individual units with shared bathroom, kitchen, and living areas, with staff onsite. **Co-shelters** involve several families sharing an apartment's common spaces but each with their own bedroom, occasionally with on-site staff.

DHCD is similarly concerned regarding the difficulty of placing families into permanent housing. Indeed, the average length of stay has increased from 229 to 388 days between FY11 and FY18, and one in five families now stays longer than two years. Research suggests that long periods in shelter can be harmful for families, and that families need not address all barriers before being re-housed.[3]

The procurement presents an opportunity to strengthen existing approaches and test new ones to more quickly house families. The following section outlines the key areas DHCD would like the RFI responses to touch upon.

### III. Areas of Interest for Additional Input

DHCD is exploring many approaches to help families more quickly find housing. Based on this goal and research to date, DHCD has organized the RFI questions (attached) around the following themes and approaches:

1. **Prevention and Diversion**: How the system can better ensure that families remain stably housed and avoid homelessness.
2. **System Connections**: How DHCD, EOHHS agencies, and EA providers can better partner to ensure families can access the health and support services they need to live healthy, productive lives.
3. **Portfolio Mix and Size**: How the procurement can ensure providers' portfolios are the optimal size and mix of unit types.
4. **Housing**: How stakeholders can strengthen relationships with community partners to identify housing options, and how DHCD can improve housing search.
5. **Stabilization**: How stabilization can be strengthened to ensure families receive the support services they need to remain stably housed.
6. **Data and Finance**: How DHCD and EA can providers use data to identify challenges, develop solutions, and reward successes.

Stakeholder feedback on these themes will be used to inform the eventual RFR and ongoing system improvements. **Please find specific questions, grouped around the above themes, in the attached document entitled "Request for Information: Questions Regarding the Emergency Assistance Procurement."**

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[3] *See*, e.g., Culhane, D. P., Metraux, S., Park, J., Schretzman, M., & Valente, J. (2007). Testing a Typology of Family Homelessness Based on Patterns of Public Shelter Utilization in Four U.S. Jurisdictions: Implications for Policy and Program Planning. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/spp_papers/67; Housing First Fact Sheet. Coalition to End Homelessness. Retrieved from http://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/housing-first-fact-sheet.pdf.