



Eileen Donoghue  
*City Manager*

Kara Keefe Mullin  
*Assistant City Manager*

Alex Magee  
*Assistant to the City Manager*

August 8, 2019

Mayor William Samaras

And

Members of the City Council

Dear Mayor Samaras and Members of the City Council,

As you are aware, earlier this year I convened a Task Force to address the mounting issues in our city relative to Homelessness. The Task Force was comprised of a cross-cut of community leaders who work with or are in some way impacted by the escalating problems related to homelessness and a lack of affordable, sustainable housing in the City (please see attached roster). Since mid-March, I hosted five full Task Force meetings, 10 committee meetings, and many more Leadership Group meetings. City Staff assigned to this initiative took a holistic look at homelessness and the interrelated issues and have been hard at work designing a new approach for the City and our community partners to deal with these problems.

The work of the Task Force was focused, fast-paced, and informed by best practices guided by Housing First principles. The Task Force, and diverse backgrounds of its members, allowed for a look at homelessness through many different lenses. Under the advisement of a nationally renowned consultant, and with the guidance of the Leadership Group (a smaller, more focused group who helped convene this process, and who continued providing guidance and higher-level leadership to the Task Force), my office collaborated with the DPD in crafting an action plan based on the approved recommendations from the Task Force. The action plan and recommendations are attached.

I want to thank all of the members of served on the Task Force, the Committees, and everyone else who helped make this process an early success. Without continued attention, collaboration, and hard work the progress we have already made could be lost.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to my office with any questions.

Sincerely,

Eileen Donoghue  
City Manager



## **City Manager's Task Force on Homelessness and Sustainable Housing**

### **Action Plan and Final Recommendations**

#### **Background**

Homelessness is a rising concern across the United States following the Great Recession of 2008-09. Lowell is witnessing a rise in the street homeless population, centered in and around Downtown and the JAM area. Homelessness in Lowell is an increasingly complicated issue due to the interplay of homelessness with the opioid crisis and health issues including HIV/AIDS and associated negative health outcomes. Significant challenges remain that require an updated, systemic approach to achieve the best possible outcomes for individuals experiencing homelessness. A fall 2018 survey identified 37 homeless encampments across the City, which is comprised almost exclusively of individuals (Massachusetts has a state-wide system for homeless families that ensures shelter as right). To address growing numbers of people who experience homelessness with complex needs, the City sought new data and strategies to support strategic decision making between departments within the City, with the business community and non-profit organizations in the community, and across the Merrimack Valley region.

City Manager Eileen Donoghue led a collaborative response focused on creating innovative solutions, which began with a conversation among a small group of individuals from major community institutions to respond to the growing crisis. This group became the Leadership Team for the City Manager's Task Force on Homelessness and Sustainable Housing, which was formed to undertake a community-wide strategic planning process modeled on the successful process implemented by Worcester. City Manager Donoghue worked with the Leadership Team and community stakeholders to appoint a Task Force comprised of a cross-section of community leaders involved with philanthropy, homelessness services, outreach, emergency response, healthcare and business interests to build the necessary coalition to find solutions for single adult homelessness in Lowell. The Task Force was charged with assessing information to create the most complete picture of the situation and then find sustainable solutions in Lowell.

At the same time the City Manager appointed the Task Force, the Leadership Team engaged Barbara Poppe, a national homelessness consultant, to help guide the process. Ms. Poppe is the former Executive Director of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness where she oversaw the federal response to homelessness by working with 19 federal agencies to create partnerships across every level of government and with the private sector.

## **City Manager’s Task Force on Homelessness and Sustainable Housing**

**Task Force Objective:** To develop and recommend a plan based on the evidenced-based “Housing First” strategy, which includes engaging the appropriate community infrastructure necessary to support and sustain a long-term system of permanent supportive housing within the City of Lowell as well as improve the crisis response system (street outreach, emergency shelter, and rapid connection to resources to prevent homelessness).

**Task Force Process:** City Manager Donoghue created and appointed a Task Force, which included two sub-committees and a leadership team, to lead the planning effort and creation of this report. The City Manager chaired five full Task Force meetings between March and July of 2019 where participants raised issues and potential opportunities from their diverse perspectives and sectors.

### **Task Force Members:**

Eileen Donoghue* City of Lowell	Jim Cuddy* Southern Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC)	Deborah Chausse House of Hope
Kara Keefe Mullin* City of Lowell	Susanne Beaton* Fireman Foundation	Joseph White Circle Health
Alex Magee* City of Lowell	Susan Gentilli Southern Middlesex Opportunity Council/Lowell	Danielle McFadden Greater Lowell Chamber of Commerce
Craig Thomas* City of Lowell	Transitional Living Center (LTLC)	Gregg Croteau United Teen Equality Center
Jim Cook* Lowell Development Financial Corporation	Sue Levine Lowell Community Health Center	Adam Baacke UMass Lowell
Allison Lamey* Lowell Plan	Jeannine Durkin Lowell Public Schools	Joe Finn Mass. Housing Shelter Alliance
Jay Linnehan* Greater Lowell Community Foundation	Kelly Richardson Lowell Police Dept.	Yun-Ju Choi Coalition for a Better Acre
Karen Frederick* Community Teamwork Inc. (CTI)	Kerran Vigroux City of Lowell	Jeff Winward Lowell Fire Department
	Gary Wallace Lowell Housing Authority	Phillip Sisson Middlesex Community College
	Adam Garvey Lowell Housing Authority	

Dan O'Connor  
Lowell Hunger Homeless  
Commission

Kathleen Garland  
Wellforce Care Plan

Emily Young  
Lowell General Hospital

\*Denotes members who are part of the "Leadership Team" who are driving this initiative forward from a big picture perspective.

**Housing Committee** (\*Denotes Committee Chair):

Craig Thomas\*  
City of Lowell Planning and Development

Alex Magee  
City of Lowell City Manager's Office

Joe Finn  
Massachusetts Housing & Shelter Alliance

Jim Cook  
Lowell Development & Financial Corporation

Allison Lamey  
Lowell Plan

Germaine Vigeant-Trudel  
Lowell Development & Financial Corporation

Adam Baacke  
UMass Lowell

Darlene Assencoa-Mazurek  
Southern Middlesex Opportunity Council

Gary Wallace  
Lowell Housing Authority

Adam Garvey  
Lowell Housing Authority

Daniel Nakamoto  
Vinfen

Yun-Ju Choi  
Coalition for a Better Acre

Carl Howell  
Community Teamwork Inc.

Marc Horne  
Coalition for a Better Acre

Carmen Bedard  
Lowell Community Health Center

Emily Young  
Circle Health

**Crisis Response Committee** (\*Denotes Committee Chair):

Karen Frederick\*  
Community Teamwork Inc.

Susanne Beaton\*  
Paul & Phyllis Fireman Foundation

Alex Magee  
City of Lowell City Manager's Office

Kelly Richardson  
Lowell Police Dept.

Jeff Winward  
Lowell Fire Dept.

Kerran Vigroux  
City of Lowell Health/Human Services

Kim Yeasir  
THRIVE

Deb Chausse  
House of Hope

Dan Nakamoto  
Vinfen

Lisa Taylor-Montminy  
Lowell General Hospital

Yun-Ju Choi  
Coalition for a Better Acre

Susan Gentili  
SMOC

Joe Finn  
Massachusetts Housing & Shelter Alliance

Kristin Ross-Sitcawitch  
Community Teamwork Inc.

Danielle McFadden  
Greater Lowell Chamber of Commerce

Michael Collins  
Community Teamwork Inc.

Troix Bettencourt  
Project HEAL/IHR

Dianne Waddell  
Living Waters

Sako Long  
Coalition for a Better Acre

Bill Garr  
Lowell House

Catie Tager  
Lowell Community Health Center

### **Housing First – the Key Strategy**

The foremost challenge before the Working Group is to reintroduce and reenergize the “Housing First” approach that targets chronically homeless persons on the streets, in encampments, or in shelters for the appropriate level of supportive housing necessary to keep them sufficiently housed within the community. As noted in a recent report of the USICH, “communities are increasingly focused on using evidence-based practices to streamline connections to housing opportunities and to provide people with the appropriate level of services to support their long-term housing stability. This shift in focus to permanent housing outcomes, driven by research on effective practices, has helped reduce homelessness nationwide by 13% between 2010 and 2017.” Housing First strategies play out in communities in several ways:

1. An approach and framework for ending homelessness that is centered on the belief that everyone can achieve stability in permanent housing directly from homelessness and that stable housing is the foundation for pursuing other health and social services goals.
2. At the project level, Housing First means having screening practices that promote the acceptance of applicants regardless of their sobriety or use of substances, completion of treatment, and participation in services. Services are directed at housing stability as primary purpose.
3. At the community-level, Housing First means that the homelessness crisis response system is oriented to help people obtain permanent housing as quickly and with as few intermediate steps as possible.

## Task Force Strategic Plan and Recommendations

Global Recommendations: As Lowell reinitiates a Housing First Plan to End Adult Chronic Homelessness, the following high-level recommendations will inform all efforts moving forward, including the more detailed recommendations:

- 1. Strengthen collaboration and coordination for service delivery and cross-sector collaboration. Specifically, public entities, non-profit organizations and both public and private landlords should work together to produce housing units with rental assistance, and should continue to work towards developing more housing units targeted to people who are currently or at risk of becoming homeless.**
- 2. Organize a true crisis response system that focuses on diversion, problem-solving, and coordinated outreach that is housing and health focused.**
- 3. Organize and expand options for permanent supportive housing and other housing stabilization that provide an “exit” for individuals from homelessness and improved health.**
- 4. Partner with SMOC and LTLC to support all elements of a transformation of their shelter operations.**
- 5. Use data and technology to maximize the impact of the existing services and funding, as well as inform planning, resource allocation and track progress on key metrics.**
- 6. Merge the Lowell Continuum of Care (CoC) with the state-administered CoC adjacent to Lowell and work to create a regional system of housing options through the CoC.**

## Strengthen Collaboration and Coordination

1. The City should hire a director of homelessness initiatives to coordinate this ongoing effort, which includes a new collaborative structure within the City and across departments focused on homelessness responses. This position will support the implementation of the Task Force recommendations.
2. The City Manager should appoint stakeholders to a standing Homelessness Coordinating Council to ensure continuity of this effort. The Homelessness Coordinating Council will establish working groups, as needed, to implement the recommendations of the Task Force.
3. The City and Coordinating Council should create a public education and community engagement program to educate the public on the ongoing homelessness issues in the City of Lowell.

## Crisis Response System

1. Ramp up diversion efforts through all organizations that come in contact with single adults who experience homelessness, including those not typically involved with this work such as

the healthcare and emergency care networks. This will require leveraging all available resources (e.g. accountable care organizations [ACO], City, private sector, philanthropy). The City will partner with SMOC and CTI to re-align City resources provided to these organizations, as feasible, on this effort.

2. Transform SMOC/LTLC into a 24/7, low-barrier, housing-focused emergency shelter. The Homelessness Coordinating Council and other community partners will work together to enable SMOC's transformation of the facility and to explore all opportunities to meet the new and emerging needs of SMOC and the clients served by LTLC.
3. Coordinate outreach across the City to use a Housing First, health focused approach that will maximize impact while reducing duplicative efforts. Best practices will be used to drive decision-making and newly-aligned efforts to reduce unsheltered homelessness. The City of Lowell will take lead in convening this process.
4. Realign the City's use of HUD entitlement funds to focus on services for single adults that promote diversion, problem-solving and Housing First. The City will update the 5-year Comprehensive Plan to focus service funding on this initiative and reduce duplication of services.

#### Permanent Supportive Housing and Housing Stabilization

1. The Homelessness Coordinating Council will annually review the number and types of housing units/slots and health services that are needed to implement the Task Force recommendations then develop an updated plan to meet these housing and health needs.
2. Focus on new funding opportunities and realigned funding to develop new permanent supportive housing units.
  - i. Work with partners, especially private partners including the Lowell Development & Financial Corporation, to develop a new loan fund to facilitate new construction and conversion of existing properties to meet this need.
  - ii. Expand the conversation to include private and philanthropic funders to reduce divergent requirements.
  - iii. The Homelessness Coordinating Council will identify next steps to implement this recommendation.
3. Realign the City's use of HUD entitlement funds to focus on the creation of new permanent supportive housing (PSH). The City will update the 5-year Comprehensive Plan to support this work and reduce duplication of services.
4. Create incentives for private property developers and non-profit affordable housing managers to support serving high-barrier clients (history of eviction, poor credit, and/or criminal history) who are participating in rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing. The Homelessness Coordinating Council will identify next steps to implement this recommendation.
5. Focus on opportunities for rental assistance to support the conversion of existing private units into PSH including new funding sources such as HUD Mainstream Vouchers and the Massachusetts Medicaid CSPECH program. The Homelessness Coordinating Council will

identify next steps to implement this recommendation.

6. Create additional scattered-site PSH across the City and, where possible, the region to provide diverse housing options to match the Coordinated Exit and Case Conferencing/By-Name List Process (CE-BNL). The Homelessness Coordinating Council will identify next steps to implement this recommendation.
7. Focus on new rapid re-housing opportunities that maximize the benefit of existing programs such as CTI RAFT, ACO flexible funding programs and others. Providing rapid rehousing for unsheltered adults and LTLC clients will be prioritized. The Homelessness Coordinating Council will identify next steps to implement this recommendation.
8. Engage with providers for specialized housing (DMH and DPH) and think about alternative housing opportunities such as respite housing and repurposed nursing homes, among other options. The Homelessness Coordinating Council will identify next steps to implement this recommendation.

### System Integration and Performance Management

1. Establish a local Coordinated Exit and Case Conferencing/By-Name List Process (CE-BNL Process) for single adults. The City of Lowell will take lead in convening this process. A properly functioning CE-BNL process will include the following elements:
  - i. Flexible use of housing assets, so that service strategies (amount, intensity, type, and duration of assistance) can be adjusted to best serve those in need.
  - ii. Dynamic priority list management, which enables communities to account for changes as new people present and new units become available; and
  - iii. Effective inflow management, including the use of diversion and progressive assistance to reduce demand for the most intensive housing assistance;
  - iv. A real-time, comprehensive HMIS platform that can support case conferencing and require all single adult programs/housing providers to participate.
2. Develop and implement a plan to train all staff and volunteers who are engaged in providing services to homeless adults to be able to use evidence-based and promising practices, including Housing First, trauma-informed care, diversion/problem-solving, motivational interviewing, etc. The Homelessness Coordinating Council will identify how this plan will be developed and implemented.
3. The Homelessness Coordinating Council will develop system metrics and benchmarks to track progress on program and system transformation. The City of Lowell will be responsible for preparing progress reports and will provide these regular reports to the Homelessness Coordinating Council. The Council will use these reports to inform planning, resource allocation, and adjust strategic directions to improve results and outcomes.

### LTLC Transformation

1. LTLC should move to a more low-threshold shelter approach. At the present time, the shelter dorms require a clean drug and alcohol test upon admission. While the beds are generally about 90% full utilizing this method, a similar number of non-sober men and women are served in the

engagement/winter bed program. Of note, the building lay-out and condition present significant obstacles to full implementation such as the layout of the men's dorm and bathroom/shower.

2. Discontinuation of the community meal program. The crisis response subcommittee catalogued the food pantries and meal programs in the area. In Lowell alone, there are 10 food pantries and 9 other meal programs in operation. Although not all are open daily for three meals, there are sufficient alternative resources to meet the needs of these community members.
3. As an affiliate organization to SMOC, the LTLC governance responsibilities are under the purview of the SMOC Board of Directors. The LTLC Board has recently shifted from a governing to an "advisory board" role. The Coordinating Council will identify business leaders to join the LTLC Board and to help them meet their fundraising and "good neighbor" goals.
4. Remain open 24 hours a day as it is a best practice in shelter operations. If LTLC remains open to clients during the day, there will be less loitering out in front of the building, less of a line at 4:30 in the afternoon, and clients will have access to additional staff support. LTLC will partner with other agencies to offer groups, workshops, and one-on-one services through the development of a monthly calendar of events for clients.
5. Implement a diversion approach as part of the screening process and ongoing programming. This would divert people in cases where an alternative plan to shelter entry exists. This approach would also help to shorten the length of stay for those who do enter.
6. Hire a Re-Housing Specialist. SMOC re-housed 66 homeless individuals in less than six months through the creation of a housing search position in the Metrowest region.
7. The City and the Coordinating Council will work with SMOC to undertake a "surge" to help exit long-term shelter stayers during 2019. This will free up space for unsheltered individuals and help reduce the daily census during 2020.
8. The City and the Coordinating Council will work with SMOC to identify sufficient additional resources to support the transformation of LTLC.