



Framework for Task Force

Collaborative Strategies to Prevent, Reduce and End Chronic Homelessness in Lowell, Massachusetts

Primary Goal: To develop actionable strategies to prevent, reduce and end chronic individual homelessness – specifically to develop a path forward to achieve a functional end to individual homelessness in the City of Lowell, Massachusetts.

Background: In 2008, the City of Lowell joined cities and towns across the nation to announce the creation of a 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness. The *Partnership for Change: Action Plan to End Homelessness in Ten Years (10YP)* marked the beginning of a decade of new initiatives and opportunities for Lowell and the Greater Lowell community to address the challenge of homelessness.

The 10YP provided a broad roadmap to assess the current system of “managing” homelessness and explore the new, more innovative and cost effective “Prevention” and “Housing First” approaches. Today, these new systems are reducing and, in some cases, ending veteran and non-veteran homelessness in communities all across America. The 10YP also implemented the City’s *Keys to Ending Homelessness Conference Series*. Over the past 7 years it helped to further a statewide dialogue on the difficult and complex economic, behavioral health and social impacts of the crisis of homelessness. More importantly it focused on what the cost effectiveness of permanent housing in ending homelessness really means.

Despite some progress, especially for the system that supports homeless families, significant challenges remain that require an updated, systemic approach to achieve the best possible outcomes for individuals experiencing homelessness. A fall survey identified 37 homeless encampments across the City. Lowell has a significant street homeless population, centered in and around Downtown and the JAM area, This is especially a concern within the City of Lowell as we are not just looking to address homelessness, but we are simultaneously fighting to address an opioid crisis and an associated HIV spike. The [Huffington Post](#) featured the Cities of Lowell and Lawrence in a national story entitled, “*Opioids Have Sparked An HIV Outbreak in Massachusetts.*”¹ The article reference the surge from 2015 to 2018 which saw 129 new HIV cases linked to drug use. This compares to just 41 new cases across the entire state between 2012 and 2014. **In 2018, there**

¹ Schumaker, E., “Opioids Have Sparked an HIV Outbreak in Massachusetts,” August 8, 2018

were 52 opioid-related deaths in Lowell.² The City is seeking new data and strategies that will support a deeper analysis of the issues – particularly the intersection of the opioid epidemic, HIV/AIDS, and homelessness in Lowell to support strategic decision making across departments within the City.

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 Membership: The Task Force members will be appointed by the City Manager, in consultation with the Leadership Team, and include representation from a cross-sector of the community. This will include housing and services organizations; health and mental health organizations; business, civic and philanthropic organizations; local government, and others who are able to advance solutions to homelessness. The Task Force will be advisory to the City Manager.

Housing First as Strategy: The foremost challenge before the Task Force is to reenergize the “Housing First” approach that targets chronic 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.”

Key Elements in Plan Design: As Lowell reinitiates a Housing First Plan to End Adult Chronic Homelessness, the following elements should be considered as fundamental components of a successful plan.

1. *Identification of Population through Data Collection and Assessment of Need:* The population to be served needs to be verified and prioritized according to need. This can be achieved through outreach, review of homelessness data, review of additional institutional databases and utilization of effective and meaningful triage assessment tools. Data should be compiled in a single, central list of all chronically homeless persons, and the community should agree on how frequently and in what manner it is updated.
2. *Assessment of homeless crisis response and housing stabilization system:* The Lowell

² MA Department of Public Health, “Number of Opioid-Related Overdose Deaths, All Intentions by City/ Town 2013-2017

Continuum of Care has organized the local system in accordance with U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development requirements and recommendations. The overall system performance and adult programs will be reviewed to identify opportunities for improved performance as well as increased effectiveness and efficiency.

3. *Assessment of Emergency Infrastructure Need:* To ensure adequate short-term emergency resources will be available, an estimated aggregation of chronic homelessness within the community should be determined. This will assure that demand does not exceed capacity, which would result in the inability to move persons rapidly to housing. This will include reviewing current temporary/crisis housing services and operations to assure alignment with best practices.
4. *Assessment of Housing Inventory and Availability to Chronic Homeless Persons:* A review of current local affordable and permanent supportive housing dedicated to the chronically homeless and their turnover rates is critical in identifying available units for chronic homeless persons. A review will also ensure that units dedicated to chronically homeless persons are actually filled by chronically homeless persons on the central list developed by all community partners. All housing providers must remain faithful to “Housing First” principles so that housing opportunities are low-barrier and do not screen out individuals unnecessarily.
5. *Dedication of Existing Housing Opportunities to Chronic Homelessness:* If the affordable and supportive housing unit inventory is deemed insufficient to accommodate this population, strategies for expanding the number of units must be developed. Local housing authority, community development corporations, affordable housing developers/managers, the Lowell Continuum of Care, and other community partners should be engaged to ensure that a substantial portion, if not all, of existing public housing units, affordable units, and voucher subsidies are dedicated to chronically homeless persons.
6. *Outreach and Engagement of Chronic Homeless Persons:* Once identified and prioritized, the community will review and revise, as needed, its outreach and engagement plan to bring in those in shelters, encampments or on the street and extend the offer of housing to this population in an efficient and effective manner that respects the rights and integrity of these persons. In a “Housing First” low-threshold approach, housing opportunities must be offered without requirements beyond the provisions of a normal lease, such as clinical objectives, sobriety, service engagement, etc.
7. *Development of New Low-Threshold Housing Opportunities:* Based on assessment of existing housing inventory dedicated to chronically homeless persons, the number of chronically homeless persons, and turnover rate of existing inventory, a projection of the number of additional new units required over time, as well as strategies for their creation, must be developed.
8. *Structure of Community-based Robust Supportive Services Necessary for Successful Tenancies:* A review of existing supportive services within the community as well as alternative models for funding such services, including Medicaid or other possible public resources, must be an integral part of this plan and should include a process for monitoring future changes in the systems.

Key Activities (March – July 2019):

1. **Appointment of Task Force:** The City Manager appoints the members and Chair of the City of Lowell Collaborative Strategies to Prevent, Reduce and End Chronic Homelessness in Lowell, Massachusetts (Task Force).
2. **Initial Convening of Task Force:** The City Manager convenes Task Force to lay out its mission and objective: the recommendation of a plan involving a comprehensive set of strategies to achieve and sustain functional zero adult chronic homelessness in the City of Lowell.
3. **Task Force Meetings:** The Task Force will engage in a series of meetings, including one public forum, and two committees to facilitate the gathering of specific information regarding the housing and crisis response (see below for more on the committees)
4. **Task Force Meetings with Consultant:** The Task Force will be aided by the engagement by the Leadership Team of a consultant with expertise in developing and structuring the components of the plan. Barbara Poppe has been hired as the project consultant.
5. **Committee Meetings:** The two committees, composed of members of the Task Force and assisted by the consultant, will develop recommendations for consideration by the Leadership Team for adoption by the Task Force. The committees may elect to invite community members to participate as ex officio members of the committee. The committee chair will be appointed by the City Manager from the membership of the Task Force.
6. **Release of the Recommendations:** Based on the data and input, the Task Force will prepare a draft report which will be vetted with stakeholders and then finalized. The culmination of the recommendations will be a Strategic Action Plan to serve as a framework for a public-private partnership to implement the Task Force's recommendations.

Key Roles and Responsibilities

1. **City of Lowell:** The Task Force will be convened by the City Manager and the process will be fully supported by designated staff, including the Dept. of Planning and Development (DPD). The City, through the Continuum of Care (CoC) will provide, compile, analyze and aggregate data and information, in partnership with the consultant. City staff will also identify resources and policy changes that could potentially be mobilized to support the implementation of recommendations. City staff will work to provide administrative and logistical support for the Leadership Team and the Task Force.
2. **Community Teamwork:** CTI will serve as the critical social services voice on the Leadership Team.
3. **Leadership Team:** The City Manager will convene a Leadership Team to guide the process with representation from the City of Lowell, Greater Lowell Community Foundation, Lowell Development and Financial Corporation, Community Teamwork, and the operator of the Lowell Transitional Living Center -- SMOC (South Middlesex Opportunity Council). Massachusetts Housing & Shelter Alliance (MHSA) will provide technical and strategic support to the Task Force. The Leadership Team will work closely with the consultant. The Leadership

Team will serve on the Task Force.

4. **Crisis Response Committee:** Members of the Task Force will participate on this committee which is charged with reviewing the current functioning of the crisis response system (street outreach, emergency shelter, and rapid connection to resources to prevent homelessness), assess alignment with best practices, identify gaps, and recommend ways to improve the system to be more effective and efficient. This will include recommending ways to reduce the census of the Lowell Transitional Living Center. The committee will also identify ways to enhance, expand, and leverage partnerships to support the crisis response system, as well as, to reduce inflow into homelessness from other community institutions and systems. This committee will consider ways to minimize the impacts of street homelessness on businesses and residents of Lowell. The committee may elect to invite community members to participate as ex officio members of the committee. The committee chair will be appointed by the City Manager from the membership of the Task Force. The consultant will provide technical and strategic guidance to the committee.
5. **Housing Committee:** Members of the Task Force will participate on this committee which is charged with reviewing the current functioning of the rehousing system (coordinated entry system, housing placement supports, and inventory of affordable and permanent supportive housing dedicated to adult homelessness), assess alignment with best practices, identify gaps, and recommend ways to improve the system to be more effective and efficient. The committee will also identify ways to enhance, expand, and leverage partnerships to support the rehousing system. This will likely include determining the number of additional units of permanent supportive housing needed to address chronic homelessness, including strategies to create these additional units. This committee will review and consider strategies that Worcester has adopted and is implementing for replication in Lowell. The committee may elect to invite community members to participate as ex officio members of the committee. The committee chair will be appointed by the City Manager from the membership of the Task Force. The consultant will provide technical and strategic guidance to the committee.
6. **Consultant:** Barbara Poppe has been engaged to support the project. This will include facilitating the Leadership Team and three meetings of the Task Force; providing a high-level review of the local crisis response and rehousing system operating within the Lowell Continuum of Care (CoC); working with CTI, map current resources for homeless individuals including shelter, food programs, drop in centers, inventory of appropriate housing, Representative Payee Programs, current collaborations and resources in the City with DMH, DPH, and Health, Emergency, Mental Health and Substance Abuse Programming; and identify strategies that have worked in other communities to reduce homelessness that could be applied to Lowell. The consultant, with the Leadership Team, will facilitate consensus on solutions and the development of a strategic action plan.

Project Manager: City Manager Eileen Donoghue and her appointed staff.