

## Executive Summary

Homes for Families, the City of Boston, the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) and the Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness are dedicated to ending family homelessness in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. According to The City of Boston's annual census, the number of homeless families increased by 17% from December 2006 to December 2007. Data compiled by DTA shows that approximately 35% of families currently residing in the state's shelter system reported their most recent address prior to becoming homeless in Boston proper. Based on these statistics, it is clear that improvements are needed in addressing the housing related needs of the city's extremely low income residents.

On February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Jim Greene, Director of Boston's Emergency Shelter Commission, met with John Shirley, Regional Director, and Stephanie Brown, Director of Housing and Homeless Services, of DTA along with representatives from the Boston Homeless Planning Committee (Sr. Margaret Leonard, Project Hope; Judy Beckler, St. Mary's Women and Children's Center; Deb Collins-Gousby, Casa Myrna Vazquez; and Libby Hayes, Homes for Families). During this meeting, the group formulated a list of action steps including: a survey of families currently in shelter, a series of listening sessions with families who have been affected by homelessness, a meeting with the Boston family shelter providers and a follow up meeting to review the suggestions and determine core strategies and recommendations for system improvement.

Included in this report are the CORE STRATEGIES, which are listed with the key components and actions steps that are vital in implementing a successful systems change. These strategies are:

- 1. Adopt a set of guiding principles**
- 2. Perform a community analysis**
- 3. Develop the political will**
- 4. Implement a comprehensive assessment tool**
- 5. Establish a central prevention center**
- 6. Promote affordable housing**
- 7. Increase access to education, training and jobs, and**
- 8. Establish stabilization services and community supports.**

The April 7th Boston family provider meeting notes, from which these strategies were derived, are also included. The meeting was attended by executive directors, direct care shelter staff and representatives from DTA, including Commissioner Julia Kehoe. Attendees were asked to define what success looks like for families, and what success looks like across the following service areas: **prevention, income maximization and workforce development,**

**housing, stabilization and community supports.** Common themes are noted, as well as ideas on re-purposing current shelter staff and facilities as shelter capacity is reduced.

Consumer input also influenced the compilation of strategies. Five listening sessions were held, including two groups comprised of parents currently in shelter, a group of teen mothers, residents of a domestic violence shelter and a group of currently and formerly homeless parents representing various shelters. As with the discussion with providers, affordable housing, jobs, and support services were highlighted as vehicles to prevent homelessness. Other common themes among the provider subgroups and the family listening sessions were **community education, prevention funding, and community resources.** The focus groups also discussed the importance of public schools playing a role in prevention through education; outreach to youth and families that are struggling, and the importance of mentoring. A complete list of the consumer generated ideas follows the notes from the provider meeting.

The questions utilized in the listening sessions mirrored the survey distributed to Boston family shelters on March 31<sup>st</sup>. An example survey is included and followed by compilations of the responses. Feedback from the listening sessions and the surveys clearly indicate that families turn to shelters as a last resort. The lack of affordable housing and adequate supports during housing crises are extremely frustrating and disempowering to Boston's extremely low income families.

The enclosed information contains insights from those closest to the injustices of family homelessness-the families who cannot afford to live in their community and the providers who support them in their paths to housing and economic stability.

## **SUMMARY OF CORE STRATEGIES**

1. **Adopt the following set of GUIDING PRINCIPLES to be used to implementing and evaluating practices as the system evolves, including:**

- **Place families in permanent housing**
- **Provide support to maintain permanent housing**
- **Reduce stays in shelter**

### **Action Steps**

- Promote Guiding Principles across the continuum
- Get by in from individual providers, advocacy agencies, and stakeholders
- Use Guiding Principles to evaluate services

2. **Perform an in depth, city-wide COMMUNITY ANALYSIS which takes stock of needs, resources, strengths, and service gaps across Boston's diverse neighborhoods**

### **Critical components**

- Must include stock of prevention resources and housing stock, including both public and private
- Must include all community resources including educational, workforce and training programs, career opportunities, enrichment activities for youth, child care, transportation, counseling, accessibility of health, emergency, and other services
- Include assessment of the philanthropic, business, and corporate communities
- Include an assessment of the strengths of service delivery models across family shelters in order to determine which shelters could target specific tiers and other needs of homeless families (including language, accessibility, specialized services, etc)
- Must include consumer involvement and input

### **Action Steps**

- Identify key city entities and partners and consumers to collect information
- Compile and organize resource lists and map out resources
- Identify service gaps from the consumer perspective
- Review assessments with neighborhood leaders, stakeholders, and consumers
- Implement plan to re-direct resources to assure accessibility, maximization of services, and to reduce any duplication

3. **Develop the POLITICAL WILL across Boston's diverse communities and neighborhoods**

### **Critical components**

- Inter-agency investment
- Backing and support of elected officials

- Engagement of philanthropic, business, and corporate communities
- Use of media
- Outreach and partnerships across sectors, stakeholders, and community organizations
- Engagement of homeless, formally homeless, and at-risk families

**Action Steps**

- Community involvement as a part of the RFI and RFR re-procurement process with DTA
- Press Conference and call for community action as part of roll out of the City's plan to end homelessness
- Identify key stakeholders, organizers, and leaders in neighborhoods; convene community meetings with the support and encouragement from the city and elected officials and media coverage
- Develop neighborhood specific networks, outreach, and responses to handle housing crises

**4. Select and implement a COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT TOOL AND PROCESS**

**Critical components**

- Target populations: homeless & at risk of homeless families
- Eligibility: EA, Non-EA, Families under 200% of poverty
- Comprehensive: in depth family assessment & housing history team approach with skilled and well trained staff, web based uniform assessment tool and laptops for staff in the field.
- Available: DTA offices, Prevention Center, Neighborhood Centers and home-based etc.
- Access to multiple resources: flexible monies, rapid re-housing, rolling stock, diversion initiatives, and placement in diverse family shelters that fit needs.

**Action Steps**

- Adopt ICHH/DTA assessment tool
- Provide adequate training for assessors
- Require universal use – and system to track information
- Easy accessibility and skilled assessors with access to multiple resources
- Develop individualized plans and goal setting with families with access to community based services and supports

**5. Establish CENTRAL PREVENTION CENTER WITH SATELLITES in Boston's diverse neighborhoods for the purpose of centralizing prevention resources, coordination, planning, sharing of resources and tracking of data and outcomes.**

**Critical components**

- Coordinate Early Warning Pilots
- Manage a Housing Crises Hot Line
- Access to multiple resources: RAFT, Section 8's, MRVP's flexible funds etc.

- Identify and coordinate resources and services including funding, training, resource guides, legal advocacy, mediation etc.
- Utilization of state wide and national networks for rapid re-housing and diversion (Katrina Model)
- Communication, coordination & planning
- Maximize access to benefits and other supports (Utility arrearages)

**Action Steps**

- Organize Boston Clearing House
- Establish a network of neighborhood satellite prevention centers
- Implement intensive and uniform training to prevention, assessment, and outreach workers
- Implement outreach tactics, promote community awareness, and referral systems to prevention resources

**6. Promote SUSTAINABLE, AFFORDABLE & Appropriate HOUSING that meets families' needs.**

**Critical Components**

- Subsidies based on need, including flexible shallow subsidies for Tier 1 families; subsidies tied to asset building, and workforce development for Tier 2 families; and longer term subsidies, supports and coordination of services for Tier 3 and 4 families
- Provide subsidies as a gap reserve for housing owners
- Link jobs and affordable housing
- Promote asset building housing options such as FSS model
- Stabilization Program
- Maximize Income through benefits and work

**Action Steps**

- Assess affordable housing stock
- Streamline wait lists
- Advocate for increased funding for affordable housing
- Provide incentives for housing owners and service providers to collaborate on housing stabilization
- Engage property managers, landlords, courts, etc in prevention work, strategies for access to and stabilization
- Match families to appropriate vouchers and vacant units for their particular needs, income levels and earning potentials
- De-link access to housing from shelter

**7. Access to EDUCATION, TRAINING, JOBS via a CONTINUUM that begins with level entry jobs and moves to careers and jobs with benefits and a living wage**

### Critical Components

- Begin discussion of career paths and financial literacy in schools
- Link education, training, jobs to affordable housing options
- Incentives for work – not cutting benefits at the start of job if salary is below living wage
- Provide access to child care vouchers, day care, after school programs and restructure eligibility to services
- Career path choices
- Parents have access to programs that teach skills and provide education for them to reach economic security
- Successful CORI Reform
- Create partnerships with shelters and workforce development programs

### Action Steps

- Encourage the implementation of workforce development programs and partnerships with homeless family service providers
- Look at Community Analysis specific to industries with job vacancies, jobs that pay a living wage
- Encourage DTA to provide ESP programs for shelter families that will train families for jobs with paths to economic stability
- Provide incentives for private and public industries to hire homeless and formally homeless parents
- Provide opportunities for community service, internships, and micro-enterprise to increase work experience for families
- Advocate for successful CORI reform

## 8. **Provide STABILIZATION and COMMUNITY SUPPORTS which are visible and accessible for families during times of instability and crises.**

### Critical Components

- Affordable housing and landlord relationships
- Partnerships, collaborations, and streamlined services across systems
- Accessibility
- A system or process to identify and eliminate gaps
- Engagement of homeless and formally homeless families
- Individual stabilization plans must be client centered, individualized, and realistically address short term and long term goals
- Must include natural partners to families, such as schools, health centers, and community centers, as well as community mentors to serve as guides and mentors for families to overcome homelessness and poverty

### Action Steps

- Organize communities to assure education of housing and support services to create a “no wrong door” system. Provide updated and current information regarding available resources

- Fund stabilization services strategically to assure that appropriate support is available to all families, in all neighborhoods and “hot zones”
- Strengthen existing partnerships and forge new collaborations between state agencies, community providers, the private sector, and other stakeholders
- Utilization of satellite prevention center and political will to foster and evolve support systems and community responses to housing crises

# **Boston Shelter Provider Meeting Notes**

Project Hope  
550 Dudley Street  
Roxbury, MA

**Date:** April 7, 2008

**Number of Participants:** 42

**Shelters/Agencies Represented:** Millennium House, St. Mary's/Margaret's House, Crittenton Women's Union, Shelter Inc. (Heading Home), Sojourner House, Travelers Aid, Children's Services of Roxbury, Casa Myrna Vasquez, Brookview House, Families in Transition, Roxbury Multi Service Center, Project Hope, LifeHouse, Boston Homeless Prevention Clearing House, Metropolitan Housing Partnership, St. Ambrose, Horizons for Homeless Children, Case Nueva Vida, Crossroads Family Shelter, Boston Homeless Prevention Clearing House, Department of Transitional Assistance, Emergency Shelter Commission

## **I. Meeting Overview**

1. Opening Remarks: Sr. Margaret Leonard, Project Hope
2. City of Boston Remarks: Melissa Quirk, Emergency Shelter Commission
3. Department of Transitional Assistance Remarks: Commissioner Julia Kehoe
4. Family Perspective: Libby Hayes, Homes for Families

## **II. Group Brainstorm:**

**Question:** *What does success look like for our families?*

- No more shelters
- Coordinated continuum of housing options including subsidies and supported housing
- Families living in their community of choice
- Families in affordable sustainable housing
- Stability
- Families with access to resources
- Children thriving in schools
- Availability of sustainable and affordable child care
- Children on path to self sufficiency
- Families employed
- Career tracks which lead to economic self sufficiency
- Families with assets
- Language and cultural assimilation
- Families connected to people who care about them

## **III. Breakout Groups:**

### **Group 1: Prevention**

Question: A. *What should a successful Prevention program look like?*

- Seamless Community of Care

- Outreach starting “upstream”
- Assessment
- Flexible Funding
- Education about resources and housing
- Partnerships
- Early Warning Systems
- Mediation
- Tax credits to businesses who provide jobs
- Lead Prevention Centers
- Emergency Supports (especially around DV)
- Coordinated Services without duplication

B. *What are the key components and critical strategies to make this happen?*

1. Assessment:
  - Outreach in the community
  - Team Approach with skilled, well trained staff
  - Home and/or community based assessments
  - Technology, including a web based, uniform assessment tool and laptops for staff to use in the field
  - Include assessment of support networks, including friends and family
2. Lead Prevention Center
  - Marketing to develop political will
  - Have a high level of sensitivity
  - Manage a Housing Crisis Hot Line
  - Access to resources such as RAFT, Section 8’s, MRVP’s, flexible funds
  - Utilization of state wide and national networks for rapid re-housing and diversion (Katrina model)
  - Communication, coordination, and planning
3. Incremental Steps to Establishing a Success Prevention Program
  - Establish Uniform Assessment Tool
  - Identify and coordinate resources and services including funding sources, training, resource guides
  - Establish Prevention Centers

## **Group 2: Income Maximization and Workforce Development**

Question: A. *What should a successful Income Maximization and Workforce Development program look like?*

- Equal access and programs for men and women
- Career path choices, understanding and designing programs where “one size does not fit all”
- Parents have access to programs that will teach the skills and provide the education for them to be self sufficient
- Parents of varying intelligence and ability can succeed
- Jobs that pay a living wage
- Young children are enrolled in high quality early education and care

- Final design of programs built with a recognition of the human/familial/community cost of parents being absent from their children's lives
- Quality family life so parents have enough time with their children
- Families recognize the changes they need to make and skills they need to develop to succeed
- Successful CORI reform

B. *What are the key components and critical strategies to make this happen?*

- Education
  - a. Psycho education: create a value system and mindset needed for success
  - b. Family budget and financial literacy that focuses on not only parents but children/adolescents to achieve intergenerational literacy
  - c. Access to information re: job training program that lead to living wage
- Eliminate the cliff effect for benefits/supports (eliminate dis-incentives to move towards self sufficiency as part of a planning towards economic stability)
  - a. Access to child care vouchers and day care
  - b. Incentives for work- not cutting benefits at the start of job if salary is below living wage
- Link workforce development programs to affordable housing (parents who successfully complete programs are prioritized for affordable housing in the community)
- Supports for rapid re-employment and rapid re-housing
  - a. Provide incentives for employers to help parents move toward self sufficiency
- After-care services

### **Group 3: Housing**

Question: A. *What should a successful Housing program look like?*

- Sustainable (affordable) and appropriate housing that meets families' needs
- Continuum of coordinated housing options
- Strong stabilization efforts
- FSS Model (escrow/asset building)
- Flexibility with supports

Question B: *What are the key components and critical strategies to make this happen?*

- Reconstruct Eligibility
  - a. 200% of poverty
  - b. Gap reserve
  - c. Flexibility
- Access to jobs
- Escrow

#### **Group 4: Stabilization**

Question: A. *What should a successful Stabilization program look like?*

- Must begin with affordable housing and relationship with landlords /developers
- Include a comprehensive assessment
- Client centered case management, including a comprehensive assessment, individualized plans and goal setting, and after care and follow up from shelter providers
- Access to services (mental health, DV, employment advocacy)
- Supported steps to advancement from homelessness to economic stability

Question B: *What are the key components and critical strategies to make this happen?*

- Support in the following categories: Housing; Finances, Employment, and Education; Mental Health, Substance Use, Relationships including DV; Child Care and Parenting
- Partnerships and interagency collaborations to streamline services in service areas; strengthening existing partnerships and cooperation between DTA, DSS, DMH, and other stakeholders, and forging new collaborations with community providers to ensure seamless access to services
- Reasonable income/rent ratios, soft subsidies to mitigate imbalance until families have a stable income, flexibility by the City/DTA/Housing, minimal relocation, mediation with landlords
- Assessment, planning, and goal setting must be developed with the strengths, wants, needs, and investment of the individual family in cooperation with well trained staff
- On-going re-assessment of needs; action plans which address immediate needs, short term/long term goals, and warning signs; incentives such as money, gift cards, rental assistance, and trusting relationships
- Realistic and gradual steps toward economic stability and independence which recognize successes, psychosocial issues, and appropriate levels of support
- Short term skills training, employment advocacy and placement with employer partners with career ladders.
- Access to benefits until family earns a living wage

#### **Group 5: Community Supports**

Question: A. *What should successful Community Supports look like?*

- Access to:
  - a. Job training and employment
  - b. Child Care
  - c. Housing
  - d. Health care, including behavioral
  - e. Education and recreation for youth (Boy's and Girl's Clubs, etc)
- Supports need to be:
  - a. Accessible
  - b. Visible
  - c. Maintainable regardless of income
  - d. Educated about housing issues

e. Strength based

Question B: *What are the key components and critical strategies to make this happen?*

- Community Organizing: Strategies to ensure that communities take responsibility (examples: Crime watch, DV Round Table, foreclosure rallying)
- Emergency Hotline and Resource Center (e.g. Council on Aging)
- Support of case management, mentoring, self sufficiency coaching, volunteers, employers as part of pathways to self sufficiency
- Opportunities for and investment of formally homeless parents in mentoring other families through housing crisis and into economic stability
- A system or process to identify the gaps in the system

IV. **Common Themes**

- Assessment
- Community education
- Communication and Coordination
- Jobs and income maximization
- Access, choices, flexibility and incentives (or no dis-incentives)
- The need for a council on housing

V. **Group Discussion 2:**

Question: ***If shelter capacity was reduced-how might we reinvent ourselves to respond to this population who is now housed?***

1. Staff

- Work with landlords
- Council on Housing
- Stabilization Workers
- Outreach
- Staff supports
- Assessment

2. Buildings

- SRO's
- Permanent Housing
- Resource Centers
- DSS Reunification
- Community College Housing

3. System

- Less silos and more integrated into community

**St. Mary's Women and Children's Center  
90 Cushing Ave. Dorchester, MA 02125**

## **Summary of Focus Group with Homeless Mothers**

**Location: St. Mary's Women and Children's Center/ Margaret's House (MH) Shelter**

**Date: 3/11/08**

**Time: 7-8pm**

**Number of Participants: 20**

**Languages Spoken: English and Spanish**

**Length of Stay in MH Shelter: 2 weeks-8 months**

**Facilitators:**

Group 1: Maria Guzman, MH Case Manager;  
Jennifer Kadilak, LICSW, St. Mary's Clinical Director;

Group 2: Sandra Williams, MA, MH Program Director;  
Dr. Carmela DeCandia, St. Mary's VP of Programs

**Invited Guests:** Jim Green, Executive Director, City of Boston Emergency Shelter Commission;  
John Shirley, Boston Regional Director, DTA;  
Libby Hayes, Executive Director, Homes for Families

**Questions asked in Focus groups:**

1. What were the events that led to you becoming homeless?
2. What could have helped then to prevent you from becoming homeless?
3. What could help you now move out of shelter into housing and self-sufficiency?

***1. When asked about events that precipitated becoming homeless, participants reported the following:***

**Group 1:**

- Economy- high cost of living in Boston and low paying jobs
- CORI issues- loss of housing due to old or new CORI issues
- Lack of affordable housing, subsidies, and foreclosures
- “Slum lords” poor quality of housing- families forced to leave and unable to secure alternate clean and safe living arrangement
- Lack of employment
- Overcrowding
- Family conflicts
- Housing Priority given to shelter residents, wait list too long for those living doubled up with friends or family
- Lack of availability of Education or Job skills training programs – can get in only at certain times of year impacting ability to get a job
- Lack of time given by DTA for education and job training, expect job right away, need transition time to get on feet
- Penalties once obtain employment-with salary lower benefits,-though wages still insufficient to live on- need more time and financial support to be able to progress to self sufficiency
- No money to enroll in education and training programs, post secondary, community college, or private training programs- DTA won’t fund, if pay yourself, end up with debt and credit issues

**Group 2:**

- Evictions due to inability to pay rent and/or keep up with utility expenses
- Landlord foreclosure on property and subsequent loss of subsidized housing
- Lack of subsidized and affordable housing
- Losing subsidy
- Lack of recertification and apt. going to market rate
- Loss of disability and subsequent inability to afford rent and bills
- Wages insufficient to cover expenses (even with two jobs)
- Loss of job
- Debt and credit issues
- Unable to afford daycare, rent and bills
- Inability to obtain daycare voucher until obtained proof of employment, but unable to find employment without daycare support
- Overcrowding living conditions, especially due to onset of pregnancy and/or birth of child
- Inability to stay with relatives due to lease restrictions
- Housing Priority given to shelter residents, wait list too long for those living doubled up with friends or family- incentive to go into shelter
- Lack of family and social support
- Homeless started early as teen parent without education, family, economic supports

- Aging out of DSS system and being unprepared to live independently

***2. When asked about what would have prevented homelessness participants reported the following:***

Group 1:

- Fix abandoned buildings and create more affordable housing
- Financial Assistance- for rent, bills, credit/debt resolution- not just for when you're in shelter but for working people too who can't make ends meet
- Increase access to affordable subsidized housing
- CORI reform- be able to access housing and jobs or programs and waiving CORI restrictions
- More money for food stamps even if working
- Help sealing CORI's
- Better customer service with DTA- better relationships with clients, clients would feel better about coming in and asking for help if welcomed- have workers work with me to find solution
- If DTA were more organized and efficient- some workers don't know about resources or what's going on, don't know how to help
- Education- ESOL programs to help get a better job
- DTA and City to offer variety of free trainings on how to find jobs
- Jobs with more flexible hours and schedules to accommodate mothers and parents- wouldn't have lost job due to childcare issues
- Help with eviction issues
- Better Public Education about resources, where to go for help, put info out in community more, not just get once you're in shelter- better outreach to community
- Open up section 8
- Programs and services being made available to undocumented immigrants
- Benefits for children, even if born outside of USA
- Rental assistance programs to help stay in apartment
- Supports for families- childcare, after-school programs (so parents can work)
- Help with transportation to get to work

Group 2:

- Rental Assistance- one estimate was \$300-\$500 month- 1x payment or a few months would help
- Help with Credit and Debt resolution/ loan forgiveness
- Help with Bills- Utilities
- Flexible, Affordable, Safe, Quality Daycare
- Short-term childcare voucher for those seeking employment, not yet eligible for full voucher
- Financial assistance to help get back on your feet-grants programs?

- Better Information given to the public about resources, where to go for help, before its too late
- Better access to Information about resources and programs (utility support, debt help, etc.)
- Better relationships with DTA- getting information, quality of relationships with workers
- More programs to help teen parents, and teens aging out of DSS about how to live independently

***3. When asked about what would help families move out of shelter participants reported the following:***

Group I:

- Residents want a meeting with city officials, Mayor and Governor
- Residents want to start a petition to get the legislature to help homeless families in ways listed above
- Not make families take housing out of their community, creates loss of connections to family, friends, medical, services, multiple disruptions in school for children

Group II:

- Housing- create it and make it affordable in community
- More efficient, quicker process processing housing applications
- Redesign shelter priority system, be considered a priority even if living in overcrowded family situation, and if single mother
- Financial and educational support to resolve debt and credit issues, payoff bills to be able to save money and qualify for housing

## **Summary of Listening Session with Homeless Teen Parents**

**Location:** St. Mary's Women and Children's Center

**Date:** 3/27/08

**Time:** 6:30pm

**Number of Participants:** 12

**Participant Profiles:** Teen parents between the ages of 15-20 in shelter (both DTA and DSS funded rooms); the majority 16/17 yrs old

**Facilitators:** Elizabeth Dugan, Program Director, SMWCC

Carmela VP of Programs, SMWCC

**Invited Guests:** Jim Greene, Emergency Shelter Commission

Nancy King, DTA

Libby Hayes, Homes for Families

### **Questions Asked:**

1. What do you need now to move towards being more independent?
2. What do you need to succeed?
3. How can the city help teens in the community?

### **Question 1: What do you need now to move towards being more independent?**

- Money – benefits
- Relocation money – furniture and supplies
- Budgeting support
- Support systems – someone to help you make decisions
- An “advisor”, someone that can work a few times a week to help keep me on track
- Mentor – someone older with experience
- Transitional supportive housing, rental help with expectation for self sufficiency
- Shelter wait lists
- Able to apply at sixteen and to get on wait lists for public housing list
- People to stand behind us, take teen parents seriously

### **Question 2: What do you need to succeed?**

- Education
- Money
- Ambition
- Support
- College funding
- Housing help, support from shelter workers
- Support system including: budget, advocate, adviser, some or more transitional assistance
- Access to job training: restrictions due to being a teen
- Job training with GED built in
- Good DTA workers: available, calling, back, ask questions, see more often
- Programs regarding emotional distress, situations that evolve around family involvement

### **Question 3: How can the city help prevent teens from becoming homeless?**

- Community support: not just in schools, or in shelter
- Outreach programs for teen parents
- Services that include fathers; shelters where fathers can come
- Housing help for families to stay in apartments
- Other help than DSS: programs we can go to get help with out being worried about 51A
- Help before DSS gets involved

Casa Myrna Vasquez

Summary of Focus Group with Homeless Mothers  
Casa Myrna Vasquez

Location: CMV - ATLP  
Date: April 1, 2008  
Time: 4 – 6:30 p.m.

Number of Participants: 5  
Languages Spoken: English and Spanish  
Length of Stay in Casa Myrna Vasquez: from 3 days to 6 weeks

Facilitators: Georgianna Melendez, DTA

Invited Guest: Libby Hayes, Homes for Families

Questions asked in the Focus Group:

1. What were the events that led to you becoming homeless?
2. What would have prevented homelessness?
3. What do you need to get out of shelter?

*1. What were the events that led to you becoming homeless?*

- conflicts with mother; DSS removed her due to conflict from family member's house
- homeless before
  - one long-term apartment (11 years) then moved all the time
- had to go out on her own at 13 years old
  - lived with friends
  - moved back in with parents
- evicted by landlord due to domestic violence (batterer called Board of Health)
- lived with mom – planned to have a child at 16 with boyfriend
- boyfriend became abusive
- went back to mom's (house had lead)
- went to a shelter
- went back to batterer
- went to shelter after batterer tried to kill her
- lived with her boyfriend, he died when she was 5 months pregnant
- couldn't afford housing
- found out about shelter services through a friend

2. *What would have prevented homelessness?*

- getting access to housing faster
- housing authorities giving misleading information about wait times
- feels frustrated by the attitude of the housing worker at housing authority
- HOUSING
- Employment options (Graphic design)
- Dental assistant training
- GED – very important
- ESL – important

3. *What do you need to get out of shelter?*

- faster housing
- book that is a road map to self-sufficiency
- housing
- jobs -- all in one book statewide or regional
- training
- work
- finishing personal goals like school
- good environment for kids to live and education
- would need cars
- help with getting driver's license
- shelters shouldn't take their money and should money aside for savings
- more money for transportation
- need motivation

# **Summary of Focus Group with Homeless Mothers City Hall**

**Location: City Hall**

**Date: 4/3/08**

**Time: 11-12:30pm**

**Number of Participants: 5**

**Languages Spoken: English**

**Participant Profiles:** 4 are currently in shelter; 1 was in shelter/transitional living for 5 years before getting permanent housing

**Facilitator: Libby Hayes**

**Invited Guests:** Helen Nichols, Boston Emergency Shelter Commission  
Deb Matteodo, Department of Transitional Assistance

## **Questions asked in Focus groups:**

- 1) What were the events that led to you becoming homeless?
- 2) What could have helped then to prevent you from becoming homeless?
- 3) What could the City or State have done to prevent you from entering shelter?
- 4) What could help you now to move out of shelter into housing and self-sufficiency?
- 5) Key Points or Messages for DTA and the City of Boston

**1. When asked about events that precipitated becoming homeless, participants reported the following:**

- Prevention \$\$ from DTA not properly administered (2002)
- No back rent assistance
- Not eligible for legal assistance
- Domestic Violence
- Community supports not helpful in regard to domestic violence
- No other options, after being doubled up
- Homeless as a teen
- Parents live in public housing, lease and size of apartment prevents them from staying with parents
- Tenant in a home that was foreclosed
- Lack of education prevents from getting a good job
- Never have had own apartment; lived with parents in an overcrowded and chaotic home which was not safe due to siblings' gang involvement
- Participants also noted being scared to enter shelter and felt forced in to get any support; two participants left shelter initially and re-entered when eligible (one waited the full 12 months, the other appealed the 12 month rule).

**2. When asked about what would have prevented homelessness, participants reported the following:**

- Middle school education about basic life skills including housing, planning for the future, importance of education, jobs, and higher education
- More vocational training models in schools to teach trades and give more interesting and hand on work experience
- School supports and increased outreach
- Open doors for opportunities for youth that are having problems instead of labeling, shutting doors, suspending, etc
- More supports for parents, such as ESL, mental health, and assistance with parenting
- More supports for youth, such as mentoring
- Community education for police, schools, health centers regarding domestic violence
- Community education for police, schools, health centers, etc regarding mental health disabilities
- Education regarding domestic violence and relationships in high school
- Access to reasonable accommodations and disability housing
- More understanding from DTA and Housing Authorities and better customer service and service delivery
- Longer term assistance...The 1 yr, 18 month, and 3 year subsidies are a waste as it is not long enough
- More money
- Increased public awareness regarding family homelessness

**3. When asked about what the city and state could have done so that participants did not have to enter shelter, they reported the following:**

- Access to services before having to be “on the streets”
- Definition of homeless to include “doubled up”
- Easier access and clarification of “priority status” on housing waiting lists, especially surrounding Domestic Violence
- Assist with lease issues in public housing
- Change 12 month rule
- Acknowledge “over crowding” as a priority
- Build larger public housing units to prevent over crowding
- More focus on support for survivors of Domestic Violence, rather than isolation
- MORE HOUSING
- More teen housing programs
- Address neighborhood gentrification
- More support and steps out of poverty/homelessness
- Better system for waiting lists to reduce the wait
- Cash benefits too low to provide for basic necessities
- Change Housing rules regarding CORI’s, especially surrounding youth
- More rehabilitation programs for men and children

**4. When asked what could be done now to assist participants overcome homelessness, they reported the following:**

- Priority status for Domestic Violence Survivor
- Better customer service and support from DTA workers
- Support services being adequately staffed to provide appropriate supports and resources
- Better clarity of paper work
- Better jobs to pay high rents
- Clarification of rules regarding education and cash benefits
- Better outcomes from job programs, including more services and connections to jobs
- More flexibility, less requirements and restrictions regarding cash benefits
- More information and access to models like Mass Rehab
- More variety of job training program
- More computer access (for job applications) and skill building
- Transportation assistance
- Credit assistance and education
- Change rules surrounding 5 yr housing history requirements on applications
- MORE RESOURCES
- Less judgments and more respect
- Reduce barriers around values of cars, assets, savings especially with high cost of rents
- Have transitional living available for those it is appropriate for
- Do not force decisions
- Allow families to remain in their communities for shelter and housing so that they can have access to their support systems

5. *When asked what the key items the City and State should do, participants reported the following:*

- HELP
- Affordable \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank: housing, transportation, diapers, food, utilities, etc)
- Income Adjustments
- “Low Income” housing guidelines are too expensive and should be adjusted to meet the needs of low income families
- Adjust DV and homeless priorities
- Provide updated information

## Sample Survey

(reproduced as completed by respondent)

### Homes for Families/City of Boston Prevention Survey

Please answer the following questions. Your answers and your experiences will help us to identify gaps and improve services for all families in Boston. Please be specific and thorough. Your stories and input about your experience facing housing emergencies are appreciated and important. All surveys are anonymous and will not affect your shelter benefits.

1. Please describe where you and your family lived for the 12 months prior to entering shelter. Please include any issues your family confronted that may have led you to needing homeless shelter.

*Aunt's house, mom's house, uncle's house, sister's home, 2 friends home. 1 child with me, the other were ever he could sleep*

2. What would have prevented you from becoming homeless (examples: \$1,000 towards back rent, being added to a family member's lease)?

*1. back rent. 2. getting help with mental health issue. Better job more hours*

3. What could the City of Boston, the State, or other service agency have done to assist your family so you did not have to enter shelter?

*Not make us wait 1 yr to be placed*

## Homes for Families and City of Boston Family Homeless Prevention Survey Results

Winter 2008

Compiled by Melissa Quirk, Emergency Shelter Commission

Total Number of Responses: 30

### Where were you housed before entering shelter?

#### Location of Respondents

Outside of Boston	27%
Boston	10%
Location Unspecified	63%

#### Type of Housing

Market Rate Rental Housing	17%
Subsidized Rental	13%
Unspecified	60%

### What could have prevented your homelessness?

Financial Assistance for Rent	65%
Flexibility in Subsidized Housing	5%
Increased or Any Source of Wages	30%

### What could agencies have done to assist in preventing your family from entering shelter?

#### Type of Assistance

Financial Assistance for Rent or Utilities	93%
Employment Assistance	7%

#### Frequency of Financial Assistance

Ongoing Financial Assistance	86%
One time Financial Assistance	14%

**CHILDREN'S SERVICES OF ROXBURY**  
Family Homelessness Prevention Survey

<b>Describe where you and your family lived 12 months prior to entering shelter.</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Moved back to MA from another state or province	7	12.3%
Immigrated from another country	5	8.8%
Sharing residence with family or friends in overcrowded and/or difficult conditions.	24	42.1%
Living in my own home or apt. unit.	17	29.8%
Living in a home that was loss in foreclosure.	3	5.3%
Incarcerated (children with a family member)	1	1.8%
<b>Total Responses</b>	<b>57</b>	
<b>Describe issues confronted leading to homelessness?</b>	<b>Responses</b>	
No employment, loss employment, or under employment.	16	39.0%
Unable to maintain rent or rent increased.	7	17.1%
Eviction following dispute with landlord about repairs, condition of apartment, rent, etc.	6	14.6%
Language barriers.	2	4.9%
Break up of marriage.	3	7.3%
Domestic violence.	2	4.9%
Illness and inability to work	3	7.3%
Mental health issues.	1	2.4%
Incarceration	1	2.4%
<b>Total Responses</b>	<b>41</b>	
<b>What would have prevented you from becoming homeless?</b>	<b>Responses</b>	
Good job paying above minimum wage.	17	34.7%
More education in order to get better job.	4	8.2%
Being able to work.	2	4.1%
Having an apartment I could afford.	9	18.4%
Better decision making.	4	8.2%
Supportive services to maintain housing.	3	6.1%
Access to affordable childcare.	3	6.1%
Being added to family or friend's lease while keeping eligibility for housing.	4	8.2%
Help with mental health issues.	1	2.0%
Help with dispute with landlord.	2	4.1%
<b>Total Responses</b>	<b>49</b>	
<b>What could city, state, or other agency have done to assist you in avoiding shelter?</b>	<b>Responses</b>	
Availability and access to job training programs.	2	3.1%
Better education.	1	1.6%
Provide good paying jobs.	8	12.5%
Access to employment and other assistance for people with CORI.	3	4.7%
Access to section 8, vouchers, or housing I can afford.	18	28.1%
Assistance in paying rent or mortgage arrearage.	11	17.2%
Better management/mediation of tenant/landlord disputes.	3	4.7%
Help and/or mediation for people facing foreclosures.	3	4.7%
More stabilization and supportive services to maintain housing.	3	4.7%
Housing services in the communities people live in.	1	1.6%
Help with utility payments.	2	3.1%
Access to free child care; fewer restrictions for childcare vouchers	3	4.7%
Assistance in managing finances.	2	3.1%
Housing and job assistance for families new to America.	2	3.1%
Intervention for people who become ill.	2	3.1%
<b>Total Responses</b>	<b>64</b>	

