2015 Visioning Day Report

Raising Our Voice

We raise our voice for:
1. More affordable housing
2. Education
3. Commitment to families

We raise our voice for:
Education
Better Employment
Unity in the Community

We raise our voice for:
1) Homeless Prevention
2) Affordable Housing
3) Child care Assistance
4) Reunification of Families

We raise our voices...
for our children
for our community
for our home.
**We Raise Our Voice to thank all those who made Visioning Day possible:**

Our Board of Directors & Consumer Advocacy Team  
Our interns: Arielys Morales & Sarah Carpenter  
Our child care volunteers  
Our photographer: Becca Gilbert  
And all of our participants

**Our Facilitators & Panelists:**  
Jane Banks & the panel from the Center for Human Development  
Dr. Carmela DeCandia, Sheridan Haines & Marc Dones, Center for Social Innovation  
Jeff Bernstein, Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center  
Undersecretary Chrystal Kornegay, Dept. of Housing & Community Development  
Deputy Undersecretary Rose Evans, Dept. of Housing & Community Development  
Assistant Commissioner Anne O’Sullivan, Dept. of Transitional Assistance  
Ita Mullarkey, Dept. of Housing & Community Development  
Ron Benham, Dept. of Public Health  
Amy Mullen, Dept. of Children and Families

**Our Inspiring Leadership Awardees:**  
Pam Delaney & Rachel Heller

**Our Inspiring Singers:**  
Eliyshah Wise & Katorah Wise

**And our sponsors:**
Executive Summary

Visioning Day

Raising Our Voice

Visioning Day is the engine that drives the everyday work of Homes for Families. This annual event is the only statewide convening of its kind as we welcome families overcoming homelessness, shelter providers, and other stakeholders to come together—as equals—to discuss solutions to family homelessness. This day is an opportunity for those impacted most by the Commonwealth’s rent/wage gap to hear updates on policies, programs, and practices while engaging in solution-focused dialogue toward housing and economic justice.

On August 13, 2015 approximately 340 participants, along with more than 100 homeless children, gathered at the DCU Center in Worcester for this much-anticipated event. The theme of this year’s Visioning Day was Raising Our Voice. And that’s exactly what we did. Our Voice is a mantra of Homes for Families and serves as a reminder that will have the greatest impact on necessary policy changes with one collective voice, that progress is attainable when we are all moving in one direction, and that the actualization of housing and economic justice will benefit every family and community across the Commonwealth. As Governor Baker stated when he signed the increase to the state’s Earned Income Tax Credit into law, "In policy and politics, you need a voice to get something done." Visioning Day and this subsequent report are the voice of the Homes for Families community.

Visioning Day 2015 opened with a video and song which, appropriately, inspired movement building. Next, members of the Homes for Families Board of Directors and Consumer Advocacy Team shared ways in which they raise their voices as leaders in the movement to end family homelessness. Participants then worked together in table discussions, topic-focused breakout groups, and heard directly from the state’s housing agency leaders. The final panel closed with state agency representatives and participants raising their voices in unison for an ideal vision for supporting families in their transition from homelessness to housing in the Commonwealth. Throughout the day, participants raised their voices by voting on priority issues, completing individual feedback forms, working together to analyze the impacts of current policy, and compiling direct messages to various state agencies. We wrapped up the day with a musical performance by two formerly homeless teenagers who, with their powerful voices, reminded us all that despite today’s struggles, there is Always Tomorrow.

Homes for Families’ staff, interns, and committees have processed the information to develop a set of core recommendations that have been vetted through our members, Consumer Advocacy Team, and our Board of Directors. These recommendations are intended to serve as guiding principles for all stakeholders to consider as policy is designed and implemented in the years ahead, particularly in the state’s upcoming FY2017 fiscal budget and ongoing legislative cycle. This report includes summaries of the feedback from each distinct activity. We will use this information to guide our ongoing programmatic and advocacy agendas. It is our belief that those who have experienced homelessness, and those that work closest with them, are the true experts on this issue. At Visioning Day, the experts raised their voices. The resulting recommendations are intended to assist the state in its moral and financial obligation to end family homelessness as we have come to know it.
Raising Our Voice

Visioning Day 2015 Attendees

Who we are:

Where we are from:

We raise our voice for:

Funding Priorities

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<th>Program</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
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<td>Rental Vouchers (MRVP)</td>
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<td>Homelessness Prevention</td>
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<td>Child care</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>Short Term Rental Assistance (HomeBase)</td>
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<td>Emergency Shelter</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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Issue Priorities

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<td>Access To Child Care</td>
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<td>Access to Community Support Services</td>
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<td>Distribution Of New Housing Vouchers</td>
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<td>Access To Shelter</td>
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<td>State Agency Collaboration</td>
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<td>Welfare Reform Implementation</td>
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<td>Immigration</td>
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<td>Childrens Issues</td>
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<td>Shelter Rules/Regulations</td>
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<td>Domestic Violence Programs</td>
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<td>Housing Rules/Regulations</td>
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<td>Other (Bilingual Job Training, Mental Health/Substance Abuse, Transportation, Self Sufficiency, Employment)</td>
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<td>Services In Motels</td>
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2015 Visioning Day Recommendations
These recommendations are intended as guiding principles for policy makers to use in addressing family homelessness in the Commonwealth. Homes for Families will utilize this core set of principles to develop our legislative and budget priorities and guide our decision-making process in the upcoming FY2017 state budget and ongoing legislative cycle.

As a community of families, providers, and other stakeholders, we Raise Our Voice to:

1. Ensure that all children experiencing homelessness and housing instability have every opportunity to thrive and be successful by prioritizing their safety, education, and overall well-being. Families who are at-risk of homelessness, or experiencing homelessness, must be treated with dignity and respect through trauma-informed, culturally-competent, and inclusive practices to build trusting partnerships for more successful outcomes for families and the Commonwealth.

2. Implement a comprehensive housing agenda, which includes deep investments in housing subsidies, supportive housing, affordable housing preservation, housing rehabilitation, and new housing development. Facilitate opportunities for families through access to public housing, fair distribution of rental subsidies, and local zoning reform that promotes and supports increased multifamily housing.

3. Support families in moving toward economic stability through increased wages, access to education and training programs, income supports, and minimizing the cliff-effect. Implement seamless, clearly-defined renewal processes for housing and benefit programs.

4. Open more doors to community-based supports through increased outreach and early warning systems with timely and targeted resource distribution. Increase focus on eviction prevention and residential services/coordinators. Build collaborations and minimize wait-lists for programs that support families facing housing instability.

5. Enhance coordination and implement aligned policies, practices, and procedures amongst state agencies, while strengthening and solidifying processes for community input, particularly from those most impacted by these policies.
Raising Our Voice in Breakout Groups

Wages and Income
This breakout group discussed issues related to welfare, wages, and workforce development. Attendees learned about the current economic climate for low-income families in MA, the programs available to them through the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), and how providers can support families in accessing these critical programs. Attendees participated in an activity to explore how state agencies can best support economic mobility. 
Key themes from the feedback include: minimum wage is not a living wage; there is a lack of understanding of the realities and needs of the working poor; timely access to supports such as child care, TAFDC, and SNAP and the continuity of these benefits are critical in the transition to economic mobility; DTA should support families and providers in maximizing use of the My Account Page (MAP).

Supportive Communities
This breakout group discussed issues related to stabilization services as families transition out of shelter, as well as how to expand proven prevention programs, so that more families can avoid homelessness altogether.
Key themes from the feedback include: more collaboration amongst state agencies; more educational materials and information about mainstream resources; the uncertainty of HomeBASE - the impact it has on priority status and the need for more long-term supports; more empathy, respect, and support for families; the current system is too complicated to navigate; it is hard to access resources and supports until it is too late; more education, job training, and child care resources; assessments and considerations of trauma and other challenges faced by families should be considered for placements and service delivery.

Culture Shift
This breakout group discussed how service providers can partner with families to identify and implement more immediate and positive culture shifts that can increase overall engagement, trust, and participation during a family’s journey toward housing and stability. Participants learned from families and staff of one shelter program who are making strides in this shift and discussed the benefits of and the challenges to this collaborative, partnership approach—shifting culture—and evolving toward a more inclusive and consumer-led model.
Key themes from the feedback include: cultural competency includes sharing information in a family’s primary language and respecting parenting styles within the context of culture; including families in decision-making processes; informing families of the purpose and reasoning behind decisions is crucial; partnering with families yields more successful outcomes; fathers must be included in services and supported; trauma-informed and cultural competency trainings are critical for staff at all levels of the system in order to provide the appropriate level of support for each family.

Health, Safety and Collaboration
This breakout group discussed the trauma experienced by and the well-being of families facing homelessness and housing instability. Attendees heard an overview of a trauma-informed service delivery approach and engaged in discussion about how systems, programs, policies, and practices can best support families as they overcome homelessness.
Key themes from the feedback include: the experience of homelessness – or even being at risk of homelessness - is traumatic; policies must be informed by families; programs need adequate funding for appropriate levels of staffing and training; the front door of shelter must be more trauma-informed; proper assessment is paramount to inform appropriate placement and services, particularly where domestic violence, mental health, or substance abuse challenges are present; training certifications for staff and clinically trained professionals play a crucial role.
Deputy Undersecretary Rose Evans, and the Associate Director of the Division of Housing Stabilization, Ita Mullarkey, of the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) provided an update of initiatives and progress relative to our prior year’s Visioning Day Recommendations. They shared information about new policies that have been implemented and current policy decisions facing the department regarding the Emergency Assistance Program (EA, family shelter system), short-term rental assistance (HomeBASE), and the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP). Attendees then worked collectively to provide feedback about strengths, concerns, questions, and other ideas for each. Below is a summary of the key themes of this feedback by category:

Emergency Assistance: shelters, hotels, and motels
- EA Shelters must be safe and supportive environments where families can work through their barriers to housing stability.
- The process of placement into EA shelter, hotel, or motel is often traumatic for families.
- Families are too often placed outside of their communities of origin, causing them to lose invaluable, natural supports and established community resources.
- Shelters, hotels, and motels are often under-staffed, and the staff available lack proper training, especially in trauma-informed service delivery.
- More specialty services are needed in the EA Shelter system to support families with specific barriers, such as substance abuse and mental health challenges.
- Cash benefits for TAFDC recipients are significantly lowered (by $148.50) upon entrance into the EA Shelter system, further financially burdening families.

Short-Term Rental Assistance: HomeBASE
- The 12-month timeframe for accessing HomeBASE Household Assistance is not sufficient to sustainably stabilize families transitioning from shelter to housing.
- Currently, families must go through an eviction process in order to access or renew the HomeBASE benefit. Eliminating the eviction requirement will allow families to access resources necessary to prevent homelessness before the point of eviction, avoiding further trauma, negative housing histories, and cost burden on landlords and courts.
- Currently, those who utilize HomeBASE can lose access to other housing programs and priorities on their applications for subsidized housing. Those who utilize HomeBASE should maintain those priorities and have access to more stable housing opportunities.
- Given the limited timeframe and amount of financial assistance available, many families who move out of the EA shelter system remain at high risk of cycling back into homelessness.

Housing: Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program
- A stable home is vital to the health and safety of every family in the Commonwealth, regardless of their level of income.
- Families experiencing and at-risk of homelessness need access to housing they can afford in safe communities.
- Rents continue to skyrocket as wages and benefit levels remain stagnant.
- Apartment inventory is too low and the rents are too high, making it extremely difficult for even those with rental vouchers to secure homes.
- The high cost of and limited accessibility to child care makes it challenging for families to maintain stable housing, even when that housing is subsidized.
The final panel of the day featured representatives from several state agencies, including Undersecretary Chrystal Kornegay from the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD); Assistant Commissioner Anne O’Sullivan from the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA); Amy Mullen from the Housing Services Unit at the Department of Children and Families (DCF); and Ron Benham, Director of the Family Health and Nutrition Bureau, at the Department of Public Health (DPH).

Each state panelist was asked to share his/her vision for addressing homelessness through the lens of their respective department and about their process and philosophy for community engagement. Members of Homes for Families’ Consumer Advocacy Team then shared key points that were raised in each of the day’s breakout groups, and panelists were offered an opportunity to respond. To close, the state agency leaders shared what they raise their individual voices for relative to family homelessness. Visioning Day attendees and panelists were then prompted to raise their voices in unison for each distinct statement, signifying our shared vision and goals for the Commonwealth and its efforts to keep children and families safe by preventing homelessness and successfully transitioning families experiencing homelessness into safe, stable, and affordable housing. The statements, led by each of the state agency representatives, are included in the call out boxes that follow.

Consistent with the Raising Our Voice theme, attendees were invited to submit open-ended messages to each of the 4 agencies represented on the panel. In reviewing their direct messages, an over-arching theme is evident: families must be able to access programs designed to support them in a timely fashion, and with dignity and respect. Trauma-informed, culturally-competent ‘front door’ access across all state agencies with adequate staffing levels, equipped with resources for training, is paramount to assisting families in obtaining and maintaining housing they can afford and moving toward economic stability.

Below is a summary of these themes by agency:

**Department of Housing and Community Development:**

*We raise our voice for MORE HOUSING and UPSTREAM SOLUTIONS*

**Housing! Housing! Housing...We Can Truly Afford!** As anticipated, our members overwhelmingly are calling for increased investments in housing that families can afford, specifically the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program and Public Housing. In the absence of an adequate amount of housing that low income families can afford, access to shelter remains a necessity for families who are left without a safe place to stay.

Families and providers seek to reduce barriers to shelter access while enhancing proper trauma-informed assessment, triage, and placement of homeless families, taking into consideration the strengths and service needs of each individual member of the household, including children. An increase to the number of specialized shelter units to accommodate families struggling with mental health and/or substance abuse issues would assist families with those service needs in transitioning out of homelessness and into housing stability.
Department of Transitional Assistance:

*We raise our voice to give families benefits quickly and with dignity and respect*

*Access! Access! Access….With Dignity and Respect!* A clear thread throughout the messages to the DTA is the call for eased access to benefits and to the workers who are processing applications and re-certifications for benefits. In addition, the mistreatment of not only families but also the staff supporting them could be negated by increasing the amount of staff at the DTA and offering trainings around customer service and trauma-informed approaches to delivering services.

To better increase coordination with DHCD, many suggested having designated DTA staff who could respond to the requests for information from shelter staff regarding the cases of families residing in shelter. Additionally, many participants expressed a need to revamp the process by which child care vouchers are accessed to allow families access to a voucher while seeking employment or placement in a job training program, along with transportation supports.

Department of Children and Families:

*We raise our voice for DCF to be more engaged on housing issues*

*Connections! Connections! Connections…to Viable Resources!* Our participants are calling for increased coordination with DCF workers so that shelter staff supporting families around keeping their children safe are engaged in the families’ service plans. There was also a clear message for the need for an expansion of staff at DCF and for increased resource availability to serve families in need, particularly housing resources for reunification purposes.

Department of Public Health:

*We raise our voice for racial and economic justice*

*More! More! More...Just More!* Visioning Day participants made clear that there is a need to make a direct link between stable housing and healthy living. Our members expressed the need for an increased presence of services available to families who are faced with barriers to housing particularly around mental health and substance abuse issues, including specialty shelters able to provide appropriate services. Participants expressed the need for safe and sanitary conditions of shelters, motels, housing, and communities, as well as access to transportation and health care. Children’s health, safety, and general well-being were all stressed as critical factors.
Stay Engaged

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#OurVoice #EndHomelessness #HousingSolutions #OnSolidGround

- "Sharing my ideas and learning about new ones changed my perspective on the situation at hand. It made me feel like everything would work out for the best."

- "Engage families more for feedback before you make critical changes."

- "I would like to thank you for letting families voice their opinions. Being homeless when I was a child let me know that there are people out there who care. I appreciate and am very grateful I attended this event."

About Homes for Families

Homes for Families is a statewide advocacy organization committed to ending family homelessness through permanent and emergency solutions. We are a collaborative of families who have experienced homelessness, service providers, and advocates. Together we educate, organize, and advocate for improved public policies to address the root causes of family homelessness with holistic and community-based solutions.

Libby Hayes  Nilaya Montalvo  Diane Sullivan
Executive Director  Director of Leadership & Community Building  Policy Director

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