

Greater Lowell Regional Meeting on Homelessness Meeting Summary

The *Greater Lowell Regional Meeting on Homelessness* was held on Thursday, August 3 from 9am to 12pm at University of Massachusetts Lowell's South Campus, hosted by the City of Lowell and the Northern Middlesex Council of Governments (NMCOG). The meeting was advertised through a mailing list of more than 120 partner agency members and elected and appointed officials from Billerica, Chelmsford, Dracut, Dunstable, Lowell, Pepperell, Tewksbury, Tyngsborough, and Westford. Over 100 individuals attended.

WHAT WAS PRESENTED

Presenters:

- Renata Rourke, Director of Individual Homeless Services, Community Teamwork (CTI)
- Isaiah Stephens, Managing Director, Lowell Transitional Living Center (LTLC)
- Carl Howell, Chief Program Officer, Community Teamwork (CTI)
- Susan Gentili, President & Chief Executive Officer at South Middlesex Opportunities Council (SMOC)
- Camilo Espitia, Deputy Director, Department of Planning and Development, City of Lowell
- Jennifer Raitt, Executive Director, NMCOG

The above panel of professionals working in service provision and local and regional government shared data, narratives, and recommendations regarding homelessness in the Greater Lowell region (view [presentation slides](#) and [meeting recording](#)). Highlights of presentations are included below:

Low income and a lack of affordable rental units are causing working families to become homeless.

- \$86,613: the annual household income needed to afford a two-bedroom rental home at HUD's Fair Market Rent.
- \$31,200: the annual household income of one person working full time (40 hours/week) at minimum wage.
- Homelessness is best understood as a component of a spectrum of housing insecurity, with thousands in "marginal housing"—such as boarding houses or hotels—that are at high risk of becoming homeless
- Waitlists at housing authorities (and for other affordable housing) are in the thousands—more affordable homes are needed region-wide.
- Family homelessness: 300 homeless shelter units exist in Greater Lowell. The Commonwealth has asked providers to expand their portfolios in a collective effort to bring online 1,600 additional units.
- CTI's Needs Assessment recommended providing transportation and childcare for those in shelters to facilitate employment, job search, or future education.

Individual and youth homelessness has risen across the region.

- Individual Homelessness: Emergency federal funding previously allowed providers to provide just over 200 beds for homeless individuals. However, those funds have since been exhausted,

which has resulted in a decrease in beds in the region and an increase in encampments across the region.

Speakers identified three key needs:

- **Money:** speakers asked municipalities to create a fund distinct from existing municipal funds that will allow for rapid dispersal of funds for housing. A key way to accomplish this is in the development of Affordable Housing Trusts. Focus on new funding opportunities and realign funding to develop new housing opportunities across the region.
- **Policy change:** municipalities should implement inclusionary zoning policies to support regional housing goals that will benefit those most vulnerable, and incentivize developers in the creation of both deeply affordable units and market rate units.
- **Commitment:** municipal administrations were asked to renew their focus on housing creation and develop a clear and vocal commitment to housing creation across the region.

WHAT WAS SHARED BY PARTICIPANTS

After presentations, participants worked in facilitated small groups to discuss questions they had about the region's homelessness and housing instability issues, commitments they each could make to working independently and collaboratively to address these issues, local policies in place to address the issues, available and needed resources, and who else should be in the room at future meetings to make progress in addressing these issues.

Need for less talk and commitment to ineffectual processes, more action

Most importantly, facilitators heard an overwhelming desire to do something to address homelessness and housing instability in Great Lowell. This involves critically questioning the efficacy of all levels of the homeless delivery system, including but not limited to local transition to the Balance of State whether HUD benefits are sufficient to support local initiatives, to and the effectiveness of state and federal policies. This also includes evaluating whether the policy that must be followed as part of agreements attached to state and federal grants is effective and whether there are additional sources of funding that could be applied more flexibly.

Some participants challenged local, state, and federal officials to identify ways that the system could be improved and abandon some elements if suitable alternatives can be proposed. Some participants suggested that the cost of ineffective policies—such as incentivizing the highest-need individuals to visit hospital Emergency Rooms—should be compared to the costs of more holistic action, which might provide an overall savings. Furthermore, goals should be established and assigned to agencies—including state and federal partners. Those agencies should be held responsible for reporting progress and eventual achievement of those goals.

Need to improve policies across the region

There was consensus that more housing in the region, including both market-rate and subsidized supportive apartment or single room occupancy (SRO) units, is necessary. Homelessness and housing instability is a complex issue, and to meet goals of reducing housing instability, all levels of government must eliminate barriers to developing housing. This includes making changes to local multifamily housing and zoning regulations and policies, dedicating funding (federal, state, and local) to

homelessness services and housing provision, and developing streamlined means by which solutions can be developed and provided. This includes:

- Reducing the time to develop policy and ensuring that new policies do not add another layer or delay to delivery of housing or services.
- Connecting policymakers with members of the unhoused population.
- Identify key zoning constraints that should be relaxed or eliminated in communities across the region.
- Develop, strengthen, and activate local Affordable Housing Trusts to ensure they are actively working to leverage local funding in the development of affordable housing.
- Develop policies that focus on the prevention of homelessness and providing services and assistance to households struggling with housing instability.
- Recognize that Coordinated Entry is a major barrier to housing for domestic violence survivors or other individuals or families that have experienced trauma.
- Emphasize that unhoused individuals should be housed before paperwork such as identification and birth certificates are acquired.
- Make housing vouchers more effective (it was noted that 70% of housing vouchers across the state are useless because of the high cost of rent).
- Develop creative or innovative solutions that meet the unique needs of families and individuals that could be advanced as pilot programs.

Although the meeting primarily focused on adult homelessness, participants noted that the family homeless crisis as it relates to the region's current housing crisis cannot be overstated. Rising housing costs have and will continue to escalate need for affordable housing, and without it, greater numbers of families will be forced into the shelter system.

Need to have state and federal government representatives, as well as other local elected leaders involved in meetings going forward.

A number of participants who work as service providers expressed cynicism that their circumstances, or that of their unhoused clients, would change as a result of the meeting. They expressed that local, state, and federal government agencies have historically provided insufficient support or commitment, and they wondered if everyone is on the same page regarding this complex issue. However, participants broadly expressed a desire for action: action to help their clients find housing; action to identify, expedite, and receive funding to continue to provide necessary services; and action to reduce regulatory and zoning barriers to developing affordable housing.

- Reconvene a similar meeting with representatives from state and potentially federal government (HUD and BSAS), as well as the State's DCAMM, EOHLC, and EOHHS offices. Identify ways that the new Housing Secretary can assist the region.
- Identify who reviews the required reports and data that are submitted at the state level, understand how the information is used, and determine which reports or "red tape" could be eliminated.
- Double down on efforts to engage elected leaders from other communities in the region and bring them into this conversation.

Need to address workforce challenges.

Participants working in service provision noted that the workforce is lacking: they cannot pay social workers, medical or outreach workers a decent wage and there is a shortage of people in the region with these skills. Workforce development across the region is key issue to be resolved.

Gathering together has benefits

Facilitators noted the benefits of having the opportunity for leaders and service providers to talk with others who are on the ground and working with unhoused and marginally housed populations. The meeting presented an opportunity for participants to identify new opportunities for collaboration.

Participants shared the following communication channels for promoting future meetings, discussions, and working groups:

- Lowell’s Housing Choice Coalition
- Homeless Service Provider’s Meeting
- Hunger & Homeless Commission
- Merrimack Valley Regional Consortium to End Homelessness
- CTI’s Fair Housing Coalition
- GLHA’s Housing & Built Environment Task Force
- Coordinated Entry Outreach & Engagement Team
- Lowell Connector By-Name Team

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN NEXT?

As stated in the meeting, the Regional Meeting on Homelessness was an early step in addressing regional housing issues, specifically with regard to homelessness and housing instability. Participants, facilitators, and speakers identified a set of next steps to be taken to continue the conversation and move into action. These steps are not comprehensive in addressing the region’s housing affordability and homelessness crisis – they are preliminary recommendations that were identified as a means to move forward and take action. They can (and should) be expanded in the near future.

1. STATE-LEVEL INVOLVEMENT

Throughout the presentations, Q&A, and facilitated discussion it was clear that state legislators, representatives from state departments (particularly the EOHLC Secretary), and the Governor need to be at the table at future discussions. State involvement would facilitate future productive meetings in multiple ways:

- Questions about state policies and how they could be amended could be more immediately addressed.
- State representatives would see homelessness’s impact on individuals and families, the complexity of addressing the issue, and the interest and commitment to action from local leaders and service providers.
- State representatives would be in direct contact with local stakeholders and new lines of communication could be developed.

- Local and state participants could move forward together in alignment on strategies for future funding, policy, and implementation.

2. BROADEN THE TENT

Similarly, a clear next step emerging from the meeting was the need for future, potentially targeted meetings, with a wider group of participants. In addition to state involvement as described above, the following were identified as additional participants to be prioritized:

- Landlords
- Developers
- Individuals working in workforce development
- Local fire and police departments
- Members of planning and zoning boards
- Select Board and City Council representatives
- Representation from the homeless community

3. CREATE SUBGROUPS TO FOCUS ON SPECIFIC ISSUES

Some participants noted that current participants and new participants such as those listed above could meet outside of major summit settings. They could meet in smaller groups and provide meeting summaries and progress reports. To make timely progress on this issue, topic-oriented working groups should be established to identify issues and barriers and develop recommendations and an implementation process for moving forward. For example, it was noted that it would be productive to have specific components of the Homeless/Housing delivery system meet separately and work on what they need, what they are doing, and what they can do and merge results prior to a follow-up combined “summit.”

There was an overwhelming consensus that developers need to be involved in providing supportive housing units and affordable rental units. Meeting with developers as a target group is a key next step in understanding development constraints, concerns, and how to overcome community resistance. Issues to explore include constraints around repurposing existing buildings, rent control, utility constraints, and challenges in financing affordable housing. Additionally, identifying less complicated funding processes—especially for smaller developers—is critical to creating new housing or converting existing properties.

A separate working group to focus on homelessness prevention is also key. It was clear throughout the meeting that there is not an effective or useful prevention plan at the moment: many residents are one paycheck, one medical situation, or one accident away from homelessness. A working group to identify strategies to reduce what is required to protect and prevent homelessness of those who are marginally housed, including a goal of providing more stable housing to marginally housed people, is an important next step.

Other groups could focus on such items as transportation, public education to reduce stigma, and analyzing data and developing clearer summaries of counts.

4. DEVELOP A TOOLKIT OF MATERIALS

A set of resources or a toolkit should be created for use by local service providers, municipal staff, and elected leaders. Elements suggested by participants include:

- Glossary: define terms commonly used in the field and develop a shared language.
- Permitting processes: describe any required permits and related processes for obtaining them to develop or convert properties to affordable housing, from SROs to multifamily housing.
- Grants: identify applicable grants for municipalities, service providers, and small affordable housing developers; provide timelines for any annual grants (estimated NOFOs and deadlines).
- Educational tools: 101-level documents for the public to clarify topics like affordable housing, costs of housing development, and project development timelines.
- Personal stories: moving beyond the data by documenting the stories of unhoused or tenuously housed individuals to share personal perspectives through narrative.