

Promising Practices and Lessons Learned:

**A Progress Report on Implementation of the Commonwealth
of Massachusetts' Plan to End Homelessness, 2008-2013**

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Executive Summary

In January of 2008, The Special Commission Relative to Ending Homelessness in the Commonwealth issued a comprehensive five-year plan to address homelessness in Massachusetts. The plan included a number of innovative ideas and recommendations. With the plan's time line now passed, One Family, Inc. conducted a review of the efforts undertaken by the state, their effectiveness as they relate to family homelessness, and prepared a series of recommendations based on what we have learned.

Family homelessness is at an all-time high in Massachusetts. This is more the product of economic circumstances than a verdict on the state's efforts over the past five years to address the growing crisis. Families who are without permanent and stable housing, however, face tremendous obstacles to securing employment, obtaining credit, and even accessing routine health care. Their children are challenged to maintain attendance and grade level performance in schools. As a result, it is incumbent upon those of us working with these families to learn what we can from the state's recent efforts and to build upon them as we move forward. The Commission's vision is even more relevant today than it was when the report was issued: "Today the system starts with the placement in shelter for those presenting as homeless; tomorrow, we envision a system that starts with stabilizing existing tenancies to prevent homelessness, re-housing people before they enter shelter, and linking people to appropriate community supports to find and keep stable housing situations and improve their economic position."

A variety of programs and strategies were identified to achieve this ambitious goal. Among them were four major initiatives: the creation of Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness Regional Networks; the use of federal Reinvestment and Recovery Act monies to create a state-wide Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program; and the state's own Flex Funds and HomeBASE programs. While each encountered challenges, each also offered valuable lessons in how to address family homelessness that are detailed in the accompanying white paper.

As a result of reviewing these four programs and the strategies they employed that proved effective, One Family offers four recommendations to lawmakers, policymakers and program officials going forward:

- 1. Institutionalize and expand the regional approach to homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing services.** Regional agencies and providers—many of whom live in the areas they serve—understand the situations faced by homeless and at-risk families in their regions better than state-wide organizations (government or private) and can develop more targeted responses.
- 2. Increase flexibility in the uses to which Emergency Assistance funds can be put:** Costs such as short-term childcare and tuition to educational or trade certificate programs need to be able to be underwritten along with rent in order for homeless and at-risk families to position themselves to secure jobs and afford permanent housing.
- 3. Change the focus of data collection and incentives from entrance to exit:** Currently we know much more about those families who become homeless than we do about those who succeed in leaving the shelters provided by the Emergency Assistance system. In order to know what works, and to be able to duplicate it, we need to develop much better exit information.
- 4. Increase coordination among housing agencies and those offering workforce development, education support, and asset development:** As the Commission noted in its 2008 report, ending homelessness "also means using housing opportunities as a vehicle to link families and individuals to workforce development and income maximization programs." Only by supporting families as they develop skills, secure employment, and build assets will we truly be able to end family homelessness in our state.

Introduction

This paper was commissioned by One Family, Inc., with the support of the Paul and Phyllis Fireman Charitable Foundation, to look back over the Commonwealth's recent efforts to address the continuing crisis in family homelessness in our state. Today, the approximately 2,300 beds in family shelters are all filled and, as a result, over 1,900 families reside in overflow hotels and motels. Families who are without permanent and stable housing face tremendous obstacles to securing employment, obtaining credit, and even accessing routine health care. Their children are challenged to maintain attendance and grade level performance in schools. Homelessness is a key factor in the intergenerational cycle of poverty. As the *New York Times* noted in its December 2013 series on children living in shelters, "Decades of research have shown the staggering societal costs of children in poverty. They grow up with less education and lower earning power. They are more likely to have drug addiction, psychological trauma and disease, or wind up in prison."¹ To provide hope for a better life for these children, the homelessness of their families must be addressed.

In October 2006, the Massachusetts Legislature created The Special Commission Relative to Ending Homelessness in the Commonwealth. The following month, Deval Patrick and Tim Murray were respectively elected Governor and Lieutenant Governor having run on a platform that emphasized addressing the causes of homelessness and creating affordable housing. It seemed an auspicious time to tackle family homelessness.

In January 2008 the Special Commission issued a comprehensive five-year plan to address homelessness, noting "The Commission believes that ending the pervasive social and economic problem of homelessness is possible and is a moral imperative."² The blueprint created by the Commission called for sweeping changes in the response by government to Massachusetts' homeless population. They described their "Housing First" vision with the following words:

Today, the system starts with the placement in shelter for those presenting as homeless; tomorrow, we envision a system that starts with stabilizing existing tenancies to prevent homelessness, re-housing people before they enter shelter, and linking people to the appropriate community supports to find and keep stable housing situations and improve their economic position. It also means using housing opportunities as a vehicle to link families and individuals with workforce development and income maximization programs.³

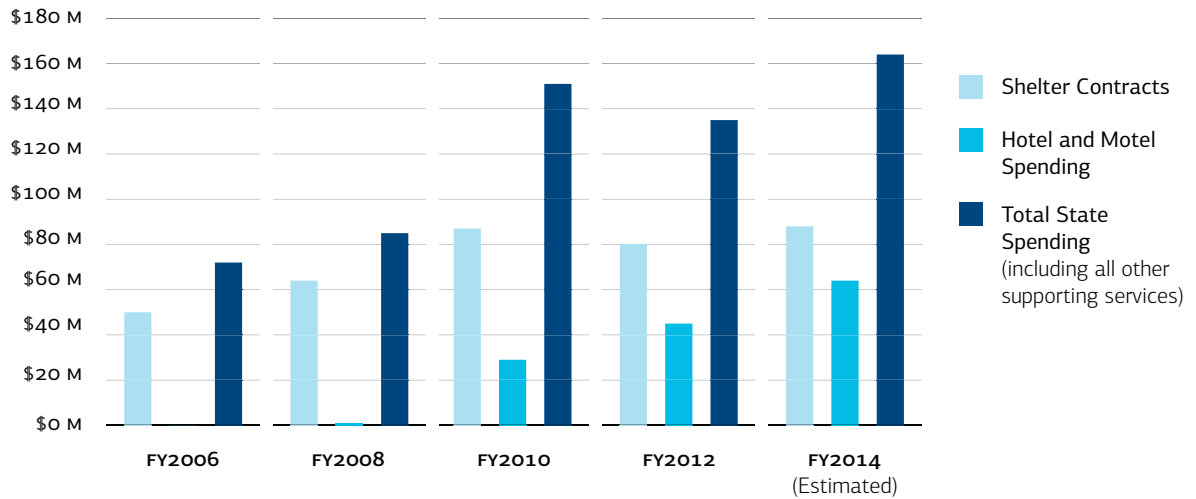
Later in 2008, however, a perfect storm emerged in the form of the most severe economic downturn since the Great Depression making the achievement of the Commission's goals more challenging than anyone anticipated. As a result, from FY2008 to FY2013, the state was not able to reduce its spending on family shelter contracts to free resources for more long-term solutions such as the creation of additional affordable housing units. Rather, the cost of contracting with family shelters increased by 23% (from just under \$64 million in FY2008 to just over \$78.6 million by FY2013). This number is expected to grow by another \$10 million for FY2014. During the same period, spending on hotels and motels—which had hit its low of \$4,648 in FY2007—climbed to \$1.23 million in FY2008 and skyrocketed by another 3,770% to reach \$46.5 million in FY2013.

¹ Andrea Elliott, "Invisible Child-Girl in the Shadows: Dasani's Homeless Life," *New York Times*, Dec. 9, 2013.

² Summary, *Report of the Massachusetts Commission to End Homelessness*, page viii.

³ *Ibid.*

MASSACHUSETTS TOTAL SHELTER SPENDING (FY06 TO FY14-PROJECTED)



Stunningly, need is expected to drive this number to jump by almost \$20 million more for the current fiscal year (FY2015). Does this mean the work of the Commission was a failure? This paper looks at family homelessness in Massachusetts five years after the Commission concluded their work, identifying the aspects of the plan they put forward that were successful, and offers a foundation for future efforts.

Massachusetts is the only state in the nation that guarantees under law a right to shelter for any eligible family in need. This requires the state to respond differently to homeless families than it does to individuals and recognizes the special responsibility the Commonwealth has to children. When a Massachusetts family with children has no habitable place to stay, the state is compelled to act. Sharing that core value, One Family focuses our work on family homelessness and so it is this aspect of the Special Commission's work and the programs established and implemented by the state that we are addressing in this review.

In conducting our assessment, One Family has built upon significant work already done to analyze specific program initiatives and to combine these resources with original interviews and analysis. As a result, we are deeply in debt to those whose work has come before including, especially, work done for and by the Massachusetts Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness, the Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership, the University of Massachusetts at Boston's Center for Social Policy, the Tufts University Department of Urban and Environmental Policy, the Taubman Center of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Department of Urban Studies and Planning.

The Commonwealth's Plan to End Homelessness

At the time the Special Commission issued its report, the authors noted the Commonwealth's Department of Transitional Assistance was supporting 1,900 units of shelter for families along with 2,900 beds for individuals. Combined, these facilities were costing the state \$120 million per year.⁴ During calendar year 2007, the state provided shelter to approximately 5,000 families, including 10,000 children, according to the Commission report. The Commission divided these families into tiers, noting each tier had a different level and set of needs:

- 750 families had minimal needs other than for affordable housing;
- 500 families needed short-term support;
- 2,500 families were facing economic challenges; and
- 1,250 families were facing both social and economic challenges.

For each of these tiers the Commission knew they needed to identify different programmatic responses.⁵

Since the report was issued, the number of homeless families has continued to grow. Last year, according to the *Boston Globe*, on just one day in November, 4,100 families were being housed in shelters or overflow housing by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; a number characterized as “an all-time high.”⁶ Over half of these families (2,100) were living in hotels or motels. These are families facing many challenges to stability. Most homeless families are headed by a single parent and include more than one child, and just under one-third of the parents heading these families lack a high school diploma or GED. Fewer than 30% have any higher education severely limiting their earning ability. (As of December 2011, the average monthly income for a worker who had not completed high school in Massachusetts was \$1,738, versus \$2,586 for a high school graduate, and \$4,371 for an individual with a Bachelor's degree. Only the latter represents income even approaching the amount needed to rent a market rate apartment in any of the state's urban areas.)⁷ To live for an extended period of time in a hotel or motel room with no kitchen or space for children to play outside adds further strain to the myriad economic and personal struggles homeless families already face. A survey of studies conducted both in Massachusetts and nationally by graduate students at Tufts University found that “even controlling for poverty, children residing in emergency shelters experience higher rates of educational, psychological and health problems.”⁸

Given these statistics, it would be easy to characterize the results of the Commonwealth's plan as a disappointment. To do so, however, would miss promising aspects of a number of the programs implemented as a result of the Commission's work. It would also miss the opportunity to build on what we learned from these efforts—even those that failed—to develop new, more effective policies and programs needed to address today's growing crisis.

Unlike chronically homeless individuals for whom disabling conditions such as mental illness or addiction may require immediate access to social services, most family homelessness results from economic hardship. “Housing First” emerged as a practice in other states to place homeless families in permanent housing *immediately*, with supportive services provided to them after they were housed. This stood in direct opposition to the traditional practice of requiring families to enter shelter and/or access services before housing placement (known as a “Housing Readiness”). Confidence in the resiliency of families, and the substantially lower monthly cost of rent

⁴ Ibid, p. ix.

⁵ Ibid, x.

⁶ Dr. Alexandra Coria, “How Massachusetts is Failing Homeless Families,” *The Boston Globe Magazine*, Dec. 22, 2013.

⁷ Tim H. Davis and Terry Saunders Lane, *Rapid Re-Housing of Families Experiencing Homelessness in Massachusetts: Maintaining Housing Stability*, Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership, April 2012, p. 10.

⁸ Sophia Burks, Rachel Gordon, Carl Onubogu, Blake Roberts, and Samantha Sandoval, *An Interim Evaluation of the Massachusetts Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program*, Tufts University, Department of Urban and Environmental Policy, May 2011, p. 20.

versus shelter provision offered a strong economic incentive for the Commonwealth to pursue Housing First. Research showing better outcomes for children in safe and stable housing further underscored the wisdom of testing this approach.⁹

In 2006, the Legislature committed to a Housing First pilot effort. This initial foray focused on the needs of the chronically homeless (Home and Healthy for Good, administered by the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, is a program which continues today). Early results of the pilot showed real cost savings to the Commonwealth through reductions in emergency room visits and hospitalizations, as well as in direct shelter expenditures. It was this pilot, in part, that led the Legislature to create the Special Commission and for the new Governor to urge its continuation. The Commission was co-chaired by Representative Byron Rushing and Undersecretary Tina Brooks of the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) and included the new Lt. Governor as well as representatives from both the Legislature and the Administration. The Commission issued its Plan to End Homelessness on December 28, 2007, charging the Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness (ICHH)—an agency established by Governor Patrick as the Commission was concluding its work—with overseeing the radical transformation of the state’s system serving homeless families and individuals. Among the highlights of the Commission’s recommendations:

- To shift the primary focus from shelters to a combination of: homelessness prevention (early warning about risks from a range of service providers) along with intervention; rapid re-housing (placement and subsidies to support stable permanent housing options); increasing production of affordable units; and asset development supports to enhance economic stability “perhaps the most meaningful protection against future homelessness”;¹⁰
- To create a tiered approach to service provision, calibrating the services offered to the specific situation of each homeless individual or family—as opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach—with appropriate flexibility of resources to match; and
- To support a shelter system that has been sized to be responsive to the need for temporary, transitional stays but not to serve as a housing option over the longer-term.¹¹

Implementation of the Special Commission’s Recommendations

A variety of programs and strategies were identified to achieve the ambitious goals identified in the Commission report. Shelter contracts were re-procured by the Department of Transitional Assistance, with a focus on better matching the location of shelter beds to the greatest demand. The ICHH was allocated funds to pilot programs focused on the Housing First model. The pilots were to test regional, collaborative strategies for utilizing standard assessments to provide variable responses based on specific household needs and opportunities. ICHH, aided by philanthropic support from the Paul and Phyllis Fireman Charitable Foundation, began by underwriting the creation of ten Regional Networks to “demonstrate how greater regional coordination and local innovations can improve the Commonwealth’s ability to eradicate homelessness.”¹² The ten networks touched every part of Massachusetts and represented a large-scale attempt at establishing collaboration among shelter providers and the myriad of other agencies working with homeless families. The state awarded \$8 million to the networks and an additional \$1.3 million was provided by the Fireman Foundation.

Shortly after the networks were created, the Recession of 2008 hit, wreaking havoc on the economic stability of many families. The Massachusetts unemployment rate of 4.5% in January 2008 rose over the next twelve months to 7.0%, reaching 8.7% a year later. The rate of foreclosure petitions (per thousand properties) in 2008 was 13.4

⁹ See, for example, Michele Fryt Linehan, “Children Who Are Homeless: Educational Strategies for School Personnel,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, Sept. 1992, p.61; or Jonathan Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children*, Ballantine: 1988.

¹⁰ Summary, *Report of the Massachusetts Commission to End Homelessness* Summary Report, page xi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Massachusetts Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness, *Regional Networks to End Homelessness Pilot Project: Final Evaluation Report*, February 15, 2011, p. 4.

and rising (compared to a more typical rate this past spring of 3.8 per thousand).¹³ Additionally, in 2008, an increasing number of families were paying more than 50% of their income for rental housing.¹⁴

During this period, many families “doubled up,” living with relatives or friends in apartments not designed for two—or more—families. The national 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report found a 20% increase in the number of homeless people who were living doubled up with families between 2007 and 2010.¹⁵ The report also notes that 43% of the families in shelters became homeless after wearing out their welcome with friends and family.¹⁶ The situation in Massachusetts mirrored the national picture.

To address the fiscal crisis of the Great Recession, the federal government enacted the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) in February 2009. As part of its allocation of funds under the Act, Massachusetts received \$44.5 million for homelessness prevention, \$18.4 million of which was awarded to the Department of Housing and Community Development. The Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program (HPRP) that was created with this funding was a three-year, resource-rich response. It allowed for significant per-family expenditures for prevention or rapid re-housing, flexibly covering such expenses as rent arrearages, overdue utility bills, moving costs, security deposits, and providing short-term rental subsidies that could extend for up to 18 months. The timing of HPRP’s creation was a good match for the Commonwealth’s systems change effort.

At the same time, Massachusetts was also developing initiatives of its own. In 2009, the state created a program of Flex Funds with a goal of providing short-term subsidies (twelve months with an extension of up to six more) to rapidly re-house and stabilize homeless families. Later, in an attempt to strengthen the interventions available before a family became homeless, the state created HomeBASE and included Flex Funds families in the eligibility for the new program. Slated to begin before HPRP ended, HomeBASE consisted of two support mechanisms for at-risk or homeless families: household assistance providing a one-time payment of \$4,000 to keep families in stable housing; and rental assistance, which provided families with up to 36 months of state subsidies.

Each of the four efforts noted above—ICHH Regional Networks, HPRP, Flex Funds, and HomeBASE—had a significant impact even as they encountered challenges, and each offers positive lessons about how we can and should approach today’s crisis.

The Initiatives Undertaken and Their Results

Regional Networks

The networks brought together all the major stakeholders in ten separate geographic regions of the state to coordinate their responses to family homelessness and to develop new solutions. The groups represented included: landlords, local housing authorities, law enforcement, domestic violence agencies, housing courts, workforce development providers, faith-based institutions, local businesses and philanthropies, the media and public officials.¹⁷ The South Shore Network offers a good example of the vision behind this effort. Launched in January 2010, they note, “For years, providers in this region had called for ways to ‘keep families local’ when they entered shelter and to ensure ‘right shelter placement.’ The regional network offered a way for these goals to be advanced.”¹⁸ Within a short period of time, the members of the South Shore Network put together a family shelter triage plan. The United Way of Greater Plymouth County offered to serve as the Network’s convener and to lead negotiations

¹³ Massachusetts Housing Partnership, *Foreclosure Monitor* and archives at http://www.mhp.net/vision/news.php?page_function=detail&mhp_news_id=283.

¹⁴ National Low Income Housing Coalition, *Out of Reach 2008*, quoted in *Housing Trends in Massachusetts*, Citizens Housing and Planning Association, October 2011.

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *2010 National Homeless Assessment Report*, p. iii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, page i.

¹⁷ Massachusetts Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness, p. 45.

¹⁸ <http://www.mass.gov/governor/administration/councilscabinetsandcommissions/housingcouncil/regional/homeless/south-shore-a-client-success-story.html>

with DHCD staff about services to be provided and control of processes, especially family placements. The South Shore became the first region in the state to win local control of shelter placements. Father Bill's & MainSpring served as the lead triage agency with two full-time staff designated to conduct family assessments and arrange for shelter placements.¹⁹

Regional coordination also helped to rapidly match homeless families to a variety of funds (such as federal HPRP funding and Flex Funds from the state for re-housing). Within the first five months of triage on the South Shore, 118 families moved to housing. Most families moved from shelters, but 20 moved directly from motels. Strong coordination among the partners allowed for rapid dissemination of the funds made available through the federal HPRP to aid with re-housing, and combined these funds with local monies received by both Brockton and Quincy to increase resources and impact. Within those first five months, the program was so effective that nearly all the HPRP family rehousing monies available to the region had been used, resulting in 85 families moving to permanent housing. The remaining 33 families were re-housed with state funds from other sources.

Other Regional Networks reported similar success. The final evaluation report on the effort showed that, as a result of innovations offered by and funded through member networks, thousands of Massachusetts families avoided homelessness. The ICHH found that the average cost of the innovations they funded were dramatically lower than shelter provision, as can be seen from the table below. These innovations—which ranged from providing housing search services, to subsidizing up-front costs to secure rental housing, to offering rental assistance for up to twelve months—are in comparison to the cost of the average family shelter stay in Massachusetts in 2010 of \$26,620.²⁰

AVERAGE COST OF INNOVATIONS²¹

	Client Assistance Only			Client Assistance plus Staffing		
	AVERAGE	MINIMUM	MAXIMUM	AVERAGE	MINIMUM	MAXIMUM
Family Prevention	\$1,669	\$1,010	\$2,350	\$2,401	\$1,149	\$3,150
Family Diversion	\$4,179	\$1,530	\$8,500	\$5,712	\$2,259	\$9,017
Family Re-housing	\$6,497	\$1,634	\$7,709	\$7,393	\$1,732	\$7,709

The infrastructure of the Regional Networks continues today. Increasing public investment to allow them to test innovative programs and adopting policies to allow them to exercise local control over the state and federal assets directed to addressing homelessness in their area is likely to both improve outcomes and generate substantial savings.

Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program

ARRA's Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing provided Massachusetts with just under \$18.5 million in federal funding to address homelessness, 30% of which was directed to prevention and 70% to re-housing those in shelter. At almost the same time, the Commonwealth transferred administration and oversight of the Emergency Assistance (EA) program through which families sought shelter from the Department of Transitional Assistance to the Department of Housing and Community Development.

DHCD took the opportunity to put forward a comprehensive approach they described as an "architecture," to prevent and address homelessness by intervening at four key points—or doors. The first was diversion ("the front screen door") and sought to identify ways that families in imminent danger of homelessness could be stabilized through housing supports rather than entering shelter. The second was "the front door" through which families entered into shelter "when all reasonable and sensible diversion strategies have been exhausted"²² with a goal of moving to

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Dennis P. Culhane and Thomas Byrne, *Ending Family Homelessness in Massachusetts: A New Approach for the Emergency Assistance Program*, University of Pennsylvania, p. 4.

²¹ Ibid, graph on p.73.

²² *Request for Responses for Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program*, Department of Housing and Community Development, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, DHCD2010-02HPRP-S, July 31, 2009, page 5.

stable housing (permanent or transitional) as quickly as possible. The third element was the “back door,” including in shelter contracts the requirement that providers focus on stably re-housing the families they serve as expeditiously as possible. The final step was “the back screen door” which required all agencies to have a networked individual to connect housing searches for families in shelter to existing supply and to provide support after housing was secured. This was meant to both ensure that families moved into the right housing (especially for those leaving hotels/motels who received fewer services than families in shelters) and that they were able to remain stably housed over the long term.

DHCD’s concept was to use the HPRP funds to build out the “architecture,” in combination with other resources such as the Regional Networks and Flex Funds. They created a matrix describing the concept in full and identifying for each stage or “door” the activities that did not currently exist and for which HPRP funds could be used (shown in italics in the chart below).

DHCD ARCHITECTURE²³

Prevention	<p>Eviction prevention (financial assistance & case management)</p> <p><i>Eviction prevention in subsidized housing</i></p> <p><i>In private housing landlord-tenant mediation</i></p>
Diversion	<p>Front screen door services (through ICHH)</p> <p><i>Flexible funds to activate screen door</i></p> <p>Supplementing toolbox: Stabilization follow-up for diverted families (case management)</p>
Shelter	<p>Assessment & referral</p>
Re-Housing	<p>Search for families in shelter (by shelter providers)</p> <p><i>Search for families in hotels/motels</i></p> <p>Connection between search & supply (strengthening connections—back screen door)</p> <p><i>Administration of short-and medium-term subsidies:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>bridging market units</i> • <i>bridging to subsidies</i> • <i>creating housing resume-building opportunities</i> • <i>creating supportive housing units</i>
Stabilization	<p>18-month follow up (by shelter providers)</p> <p><i>Supplemental stabilization to fill gaps in service delivery system (18 month follow up for hotel/motel families)</i></p> <p><i>On-site or readily accessible, reliable support services</i></p>

The Commonwealth noted in their program announcement that they were seeking to “identify players in each... region who can build on the elements of the architecture in place in their region—filling in gaps and leveraging other resources such as entitlement community-HPRP money, ICHH grants, CSBG [Community Service Block Grants], Continuum of Care Grants, ESG [Emergency Shelter Grants], philanthropic dollars and other state and federal program funds.”²⁴

²³ DHCD, *Request for Responses*, p. 10. stabilization to fill gaps in service delivery system. (18 month follow up ofr h/m

²⁴ Ibid.

To be eligible to receive HPRP funds, families had to have incomes at or below 50% of the Area Median Income (AMI—recertified at three month intervals), to contribute 30% of their income towards rent and to participate in case management stabilization services. Federal guidelines allowed for families deemed eligible for HPRP to receive up to 18 months of subsidies (twelve months initially with the option for a six month renewal). A review of the program conducted by the Center for Social Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston found the need for such subsidies among eligible families was dramatic. The gap between average monthly family income for HPRP enrollees and the income needed to afford a two-bedroom apartment at fair market rents in Greater Boston was \$3,647 (income of \$850 versus rent of \$4,497).²⁵ They further noted that less than one-quarter of the families enrolling in the HPRP program had any wage income at the time of entry, and three-quarters were receiving public benefits (Supplemental Security Income, Social Security Disability Insurance, for example). Thirty-seven percent of HPRP families reported they had no rental history making it more difficult for them to secure an apartment even with a subsidy. Finally, over half had problematic credit.²⁶

Through their architecture, DHCD hoped to answer a number of challenges that were hampering the effectiveness of existing efforts, including:

- Providing comparable services to families in hotels and motels to those being received by families living in shelters (especially in the area of housing search);
- Identifying agencies that could connect available supply with existing need more effectively;
- Identifying agencies (presumably the same) to administer rental vouchers for families who were re-housed; and
- Providing stabilization services to keep re-housed families in their units (lease compliance, benefits maximization, and asset development/income realization).

To administer the \$18.5 million award, DHCD selected 20 agencies to provide HPRP services and distribute funds. Twelve offered only prevention and/or diversion services; the remaining eight also offered rapid re-housing and stabilization. The agencies were located in many areas of the state and were chosen in part to support high-need geographies that could benefit from access to HPRP beyond what other entitlement programs could offer.

Agencies were required under the terms of the DHCD award to verify the income of participants every three months. Many agencies, however, set up more frequent communications in order to ensure that families were receiving needed services and moving toward stable housing.²⁷ During the first year of HPRP, 633 families received services through the program.

DHCD aggregated cost data from individuals and families in their evaluation of HPRP, so we cannot separate the costs or rate of effectiveness of the supports received between these two groups. Still, a number of the outcomes are instructive. By the end of the first year, according to a study commissioned by DHCD from the Tufts University Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning, 36.4% of those receiving prevention (the earliest intervention) or diversion services had exited the program with 88.5% moving into permanent housing. The rate of exit was well below what the agencies seeking HPRP contracts had predicted—75% or more—but those who exited were achieving the stated goal of leaving homelessness behind.²⁸

²⁵ Davis and Lane, p. 2.

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 2-3.

²⁷ Burks et al, p. 50.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 61.

A review of the outcomes of families that exited the program after receiving prevention or diversion services showed the following:

NUMBER OF HPRP PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS EXITING INTO NON-SUBSIDIZED AND SUBSIDIZED HOUSING²⁹

Exit to...	
Rental without subsidy	303
Family or friends without subsidy	60
Ownership with subsidy	1
Rental with subsidy	203
Permanent supportive housing with subsidy	1
TOTAL	568

At the end of the first year, according to the Tufts study, HPRP agencies had provided \$1.4 million directly to program participants, as well as expending an additional \$442,000 for housing relocation and stabilization services. These efforts led to the 568 successful outcomes (shown above) at an average expenditure of \$3,874 for each exited person or family served.³⁰ Since these families either avoided entering the EA system or were diverted at the front door, this amount can be compared to the average cost of a family shelter stay in 2010 of \$26,620,³¹ representing a savings (as long as these families remained housed and did not return to shelters) of a remarkable \$22,746 per family.

A state-wide review of families living in shelters or motels who received rapid re-housing and stabilization services through HPRP was conducted by the Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership (MBHP). According to MBHP, Massachusetts defined success for the shelter families receiving rapid re-housing services as “1) a family secures a long-term housing subsidy (public housing, project-based subsidized housing or a housing voucher funded by HUD or the Commonwealth of Massachusetts) or 2) a family is able to increase its income sufficiently to afford a market rent.”³² In their study of 486 participating families served by six agencies in four regions of Massachusetts, MBHP found that by the end of 2011, 81% of families served were living independently in stable housing. This number is substantially above the 36.4% success rate for prevention and diversion families. It should be noted, however, the majority of re-housed families (63%) continued to need and receive HPRP funds along with a range of other support from state housing programs, even after they were stably housed.³³ These funds were necessary because of the stark gap between the average income of families being served by HPRP and market rents in urban areas of the state. This gap led to one of the study’s principal policy recommendations: that “maintaining housing stability for families eligible for the EA program depends on some form of rental subsidy, for longer periods of time”³⁴ than HPRP provided. Even acknowledging the need to augment the length of time supports were provided after the end of the maximum 18-month HPRP period, the program was clearly successful at preventing homelessness and stably housing families coming from shelters or hotels/motels for a significant segment of the population targeted.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 42.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Culhane and Byrne, p. 4.

³² Davis and Lane, pp. 1-2.

³³ Ibid, p. 3.

³⁴ Ibid.

The key underpinnings for the successes achieved by the HPRP program were:

- The use of knowledgeable and engaged local agencies to administer the funds and services. The MBHP study notes, “Experienced housing service agencies with established property owner relationships are well suited to re-house families and support their housing stability”³⁵;
- The flexibility of the funding provided (allowing it to be used for deposits, arrears, utilities and moving costs, as well as short-term rent subsidies); and
- The provision of case management and stabilization services in tandem with this financial support. The latter allowed for earlier intervention in the case of crises for families being re-housed. The MBHP study noted, “Staff from agencies in all of the regions estimated that at least 80 percent of the clients received some type of case management assistance before and during the rental period (e.g., budgeting, referrals for services or other benefits, housing issues). Especially important during tenancy was the role that agencies played if trouble arose that could threaten housing stability.”³⁶

The lessons we can draw as we design future programming include providing even more flexibility in funding—being able to use funding for a wider array of costs and in more targeted ways—once eligibility and need have been established. Such costs might include long overdue rent or utility payments that prevent the establishment of current tenancies, or short-term child care subsidies while employment is being secured. Agencies also need to take a hard look at the populations they are targeting. According to the Tufts’ study several agencies noted that they were turning away prospective participants because their earnings were over the 50% of AMI limit but that many of these families were just as likely to become homeless as some of those with slightly lower incomes. Additionally, some of the lowest income families served were not likely to be able to maintain their housing once HPRP funding ended unless it was replaced by a comparable subsidy from another program. This fact needs to be integrated into program design and future programs need to be targeted to those who are most likely to achieve the desired outcome in the anticipated time frame with the level of support provided. It does not help families to ping pong from shelter to housing and back again when subsidies end.

The MBHP study also documented the “cliff effect” faced by families whose incomes rose over the eligibility criteria and who then had to pay a larger percentage of their income in rent adding significantly to their long-term housing instability. The authors of the MBHP study note, “increasing family income should be a desirable goal. However, the ‘cliff effects’ associated with program exit can be burdensome to a family if the portion of income it will spend on rent is much greater than the growth of its income. This situation can threaten fragile economic security and stall transition off the program.”³⁷ In other words, anticipation of a sudden loss of benefits from rising income can itself be a disincentive to increasing earnings and program exit for some families. By increasing flexibility, more closely aligning resources to the specific needs of individual families (including coordination between short- and long-term subsidies), and by including mechanisms to soften the cliff effect—allowing benefits to decrease more slowly over time—not only could program effectiveness be improved, but it is likely a larger number of families could be served while still realizing substantial cost savings over shelter.

Flex Funds

In July 2009, Massachusetts instituted its own program called Housing Stabilization Flexible Funds (or Flex Funds) with an appropriation of \$13.98 million for FY2010 contained within the Emergency Assistance line item (or approximately 9% of EA funds for the year). Flex Funds could be awarded in three distinct circumstances:

- for families being placed into subsidized housing;
- for families being placed into market rate housing; and
- transportation funds for families moving out of state.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 4.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 12.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 20.

To be eligible for funds for subsidized or market rate housing, a family had to be in shelter for at least 30 days and have secured an apartment with a twelve-month lease. For families moving into subsidized housing the funds could be used for moving expenses, their share of first and last month's rent, as well as a security deposit, to buy minimal furnishings (bed and refrigerator), and clearing utility arrears. These families could be allocated a maximum of \$2,000 by the program. For those moving into market rate units the covered costs could include all of those listed above, as well as a rental subsidy for up to twelve months. The non-rent part of Flex Funds to families living in market rate units was capped at \$1,500 and families were required to contribute 25% of their income toward the monthly rent. Families in market rate housing were also eligible for a one-time six-month extension of their rental subsidy. For families moving out of state the length of time in shelter was waived, they simply had to be in a shelter and have a confirmed plan for relocation out of state.³⁸

Each EA provider who participated in Flex Funds was required to assist the families they placed in transitioning to, and stabilizing in, their new housing. The overall goal, as with HPRP, was to move families out of shelter permanently and, as a result, reduce EA costs going forward.

Between August 1, 2009 and February 28, 2010, according to DHCD, 1,144 families were moved into housing at a total cost of \$10.4 million in Flex Funds. In addition, 757 families received relocation assistance at a cost of \$1.06 million. Just over 1,900 families were served in the first year. In March 2010—four months before the end of the fiscal year—the Commonwealth notified EA providers that the program was being suspended, and urged them to utilize any HPRP funds available to them to continue the program of shelter diversion and re-housing.³⁹ For those communities that had no HPRP funding, the Commonwealth would continue access to Flex Funds for the remainder of the fiscal year.

Later in March 2010 in a memo sent to service providers, DHCD clarified their view of the program and the intent to continue a program of short-term rental subsidies in order to re-house the greatest number of families. In the memo, DHCD's Associate Director explained that while many families might be reluctant to accept short-term subsidies, the lack of availability of long-term supports meant that expectations would have to change. He wrote, "Therefore, this is where shelter staff involved in re-housing families play a critical role in providing a reality check to families on the limited availability of long term subsidies, the existence of long waiting lists for these resources, and the likelihood that a family will qualify for these resources based on prior housing history, current credit and criminal records. The use of transitional rental supports is the best chance families have to get re-housed and begin to build a positive housing resume." The memo also noted that families should be made aware that they would not lose their place on state and federal housing waiting lists if they were re-housed with short-term subsidies and added such short-term monies "are the primary vehicle we have right now to move families quickly from shelter into housing."⁴⁰

In FY2011 an additional \$26.7 million was allocated to Flex Funds for the year through the EA budget (\$20 million initially and then a \$6.7 million extension). By the end of FY2011, 3,500 families in total had been served by the program. It was at this point that the Commonwealth undertook a new and even more wide ranging program (HomeBASE) described on the next page. Each of the families being served by Flex Funds was considered eligible to be served by HomeBASE.

³⁸ Department of Housing and Community Development, Division of Housing Stabilization, *Emergency Assistance Flexible Funds Administrative Plan: Re-housing and Stabilization (including Extensions)*, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, update 8/2/10, pp. 2-5.

³⁹ Robert Pulster, "Housing Stabilization Flexible Funds Announcement," *Memorandum*, Department of Housing and Community Development, March 1, 2010

⁴⁰ Robert Pulster, "Clarification of the Use of Short Term Rental Supports," *Memorandum*, Department of Housing and Community Development, March 18, 2010.

HomeBASE

The funds received by the state for HPRP were relatively short-term resources, intended by the federal government to jump-start the economy as much as to address serious social issues. In 2011, the state—building on the experience of Flex Funds and HPRP—decided to undertake a more expansive program emphasizing Housing First. HomeBASE, as the program was named, was designed to offer two types of benefits to families:

- Household assistance designed to keep families housed using a one-time payment (up to \$4,000); and
- Rental assistance to provide up to three years of housing subsidy to give families time to achieve stability.

HomeBASE was launched in August 2011 with an appropriation of \$38.5 million for the fiscal year (FY2012). This represented 28% of the EA shelter budget for the year, with just under \$98 million still appropriated to shelter providers and short-term housing. It should be noted, however, that the total EA shelter budget that year was reduced by \$22.4 million in anticipation of savings to be realized through HomeBASE.

Families eligible for HomeBASE included those who presented themselves at the “front door” after HomeBASE’s creation (that is, newly EA-eligible families), those transitioning from other state housing programs (including Flex Funds), and those families who were in shelter or hotels/motels prior to the creation of HomeBASE. No matter where they came from, all families eligible for HomeBASE had to have income at or below 115% of the Federal Poverty Level and be eligible for Emergency Assistance. Administration of benefits was handled by eleven regional agencies, chosen for their experience and expertise in administering rental assistance and other housing resources.

DHCD expected approximately 500 families per month (or 6,000 for the first year) to be served by the program. They also anticipated that household assistance (capped at \$4,000) would represent 20% to 30% of the program awards and rental assistance would account for the remaining 70% to 80%. This was a substantial underestimate, with close to double the number of families applying in the first month and over 90% of applicants seeking rental assistance. The lines at many of the state offices where EA applications are received began on the very first day and stretched well out the door.

In the first month, 900 participants entered through the front door category alone, 80% over DHCD’s estimate. In addition, the demographic of the population being served changed, according to a study done at the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government. Once HomeBASE was introduced the population applying for and receiving benefits was more likely to have some income—particularly income from government benefits—than those served by the shelter system. Over 97% of EA families had no unearned income in 2009 versus 75.8% in HomeBASE in 2011. This suggests, according to the study’s authors, “that the HomeBASE program in its first three months was serving a slightly less disadvantaged population compared to the original shelter system, attracting families in undesirable or expensive living situations but not necessarily at imminent risk of homelessness.”⁴¹

Flex Funds families, especially, enrolled in HomeBASE in much higher than expected numbers possibly offering a partial explanation for the findings of the Kennedy School study. DHCD projected that about 40% of Flex Funds families would transition to HomeBASE. In fact close to 90% did so. With the much larger than expected number of families enrolling in HomeBASE, the funds available for the first year were exhausted in only three months. As of October 28, 2011, the only HomeBASE benefit available to new EA families was Household Assistance.⁴²

⁴¹ Ryan Gillette and Ellen Ward, *Rebuilding HomeBASE*, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, p. 13-14.

⁴² Lizbeth Heyer, *Suspension of HomeBASE Rental Assistance at the Front Door- REVISED*, Department of Housing and Community Development, Commonwealth of Massachusetts Notice 2011-06-Revised.

In addition to underestimating the number of eligible families who would choose to apply for HomeBASE, the Commonwealth was not able to accurately predict the cost to serve each family as the table below demonstrates:

**HOMEBASE PROJECTED VERSUS ACTUAL COSTS AND ENROLLMENT
AUGUST-OCTOBER 2011⁴³**

	Projected Enrollment	Actual Enrollment	Projected Cost per Family	Actual Cost per Family
Rental Assistance	\$1,096	\$2,468	\$8,849	\$11,173
Household Assistance	\$330	\$105	\$3,630	\$4,638
TOTAL	\$1,426	\$2,573		

The cost overruns largely resulted from underestimating the rental subsidies that would be needed to house families. The projected cost of HomeBASE rental assistance for August through October was \$1,627,000. The actual payments made, however, were \$3,943,000 (more than double the amount DHCD had expected to spend). Some of this was caused by the fact that the state was serving more families than expected, and some by the cost of the actual housing units that were available to families. The program design called for each region (other than Boston) to identify and place families in apartments priced at up to 80% of the area’s fair market rent. Waivers were available if an agency felt they could not meet this goal, but financial projections for rental assistance (called HAP) were predicated upon it. According to the Kennedy School study, “Original forecasts assumed the average HAP payment would be around \$624 across all sites, but in reality, the average HAP was closer to \$810. This was because area rents proved to be higher than expected, leading to a blanket waiver which allowed agencies to subsidize rents up to 100% of FMR [Fair Market Value].”⁴⁴

The financial assumptions for the household assistance portion of HomeBASE (the one-time stabilization subsidy) were also off, although with less overall impact. The state assumed that many families would not receive the maximum \$4,000 assistance payment and budgeted for an average benefit of \$3,000, “when in reality nearly all families received \$4,000 in assistance.”⁴⁵

HomeBASE not only expended most of its annual appropriation in only three months, the program also appeared to be on a path directly opposite its goal—lowering the cost of the Emergency Assistance system by placing families into housing rather than temporary shelter. Gillette and Ward in their assessment provide a comparison of the cost of the EA system as a whole before and after HomeBASE.

⁴³ Gillette and Ward, p. 19.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 21.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

TOTAL COST OF ENTIRE EA SYSTEM, PRE- AND POST-HOMEBASE

	Original Shelter System (FY2011)	Projected Shelter System + HomeBASE (FY2012)
Number Served by Shelters	8,710	3,884
Number Served by Hotels	5,434	2,925
Number Served by Rental Assistance	—	11,320
Number Served by Household Assistance	—	1,540
Number Served by Flex Funds	3,488	—
Total Families Served	17,632	19,669
Average Cost per Family Served	\$9,005	\$9,928
TOTAL Cost of Service Provision	\$158,785,000	\$195,289,000

There are two interesting lessons that can be drawn from the experience of HomeBASE. The first is the fact that although the cost per EA family served rose from FY2011 to FY2012, families—especially the thousands housed in motels and hotels—were receiving better and more appropriate services likely to result in their ability to secure stable housing. The second would seem to confirm the first. HomeBASE (originally designed to be a three year subsidy program) was redesigned to be a two-year benefit that ended on June 30, 2014. A number of families had already exited HomeBASE by the spring of 2014 and their experience, the state hopes, may be instructive. Of these exited families, only 11% returned to the shelter system (despite dire predictions by some that the end of benefits would result in an 80% to 90% return rate of families to shelter). The remainder of the families who left HomeBASE in the months before the program’s end found other housing solutions.⁴⁶

Conclusions and Recommendations

Homelessness for families remains a crisis in the Commonwealth as the Governor acknowledged on January 1, 2014: “We’re going to have to think in some fresh ways rather than just try to do better what we’re already doing. ... I’m really worried about this. It is not just the spike in the number [of homeless families]. It’s what the economy is doing to vulnerable people.”⁴⁷ The simplest way to design any statewide program is to have a single set of services and benefits and apply them to a whole population. While such a program response is simple to understand and to advocate for, especially legislatively, it is very likely to be both ineffective and expensive. If the experience of the last five years has offered lessons for the future, the common thread among them is the need for *flexibility*. After reviewing the Commonwealth’s efforts to change the response to family homelessness and looking at both the successes and the challenges, One Family believes the following four recommendations should be integrated into future policymaking and program design:

⁴⁶ Ann Woodward, Interviews with staff, Department of Housing and Community Development, Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Jan. 21, 2014.

⁴⁷ Steve LeBlanc, In Mass., *A Tough Quest to End Family Homelessness*, Associated Press @ www.apnewsarchive.com/2104_In_Mass.%C_a_tough-quest_to_end_family_homelessness/id-80c345711bd94e6ea2860a3b509ca82f, Jan. 1, 2014.

- 1. Institutionalize and expand the regional approach:** the ICHH Regional Networks infrastructure continues in place. It can, and should be, used as the platform for testing of new and innovative programs, as well as a vehicle to promote and develop increased collaboration among local providers. Housing markets and service provision vary greatly around the state. The most in-depth and up-to-date knowledge exists in those who are on the ground in our cities and towns. By harnessing their expertise and providing venues for it to be shared with others serving homeless families, the Networks offer a rich resource to improve service provision while simultaneously reducing costs.
- 2. Increase flexibility in the uses of EA funds:** Flexibility in the purposes for which funds may be awarded means that costs such as short-term childcare or the acquisition of educational and trade credentials need to be considered alongside rental subsidies as programs are designed. Only by providing families with the credentials and resources needed to afford housing over the long term can we end the dependence on shelter and hotel/motel beds. As benefits are made more flexible, assessments of individual family's needs must be made more sophisticated. Maximum benefits should not be awarded as a default for any program, but only when true need has been demonstrated. Finally, benefits should not be static. Rather they should be seen as an arc, possibly increasing as families are stabilized and are prepared to acquire new skills or credentials on the path to economic independence, but also decreasing over time as income increases to the point of program exit.
- 3. Change the focus of data collection and incentives from entrance to exit:** Currently the Commonwealth does a good job of collecting data when families enter the EA system, but little is collected or known about families as they exit the system. Shelter providers are offered no benefits or incentives to collect detailed data on exits.⁴⁸ If we are to move toward a future in which families are rapidly housed or re-housed rather than sheltered, other than for brief transitional stays, we need much better data on which services are working for various populations and the capacity to align our incentives accordingly.
- 4. Increase coordination among housing agencies and those providing workforce development, educational support and asset development:** The original vision of the Special Commission was to link housing programs to workforce development and income maximization efforts. As the Commission noted, the only real way to address family homelessness is through increasing income. This, in turn requires that heads of households acquire the skills and credentials to earn wages that can afford housing at market rates. There are currently a number of promising programs and demonstration projects designed to do just this. These include: Mass LEAP (partnering residents of public housing and recipients of Massachusetts' rental vouchers with support services designed to increase earned income); the Crittenton Women's Union's (CWU) Mobility Mentoring program; the Secure Jobs Initiative sponsored by the Paul and Phyllis Fireman Charitable Foundation and the Department of Housing and Community Development; and One Family's own One Family Scholars program. Mobility Mentoring has helped 60 families move from CWU housing into permanent housing. Despite the sluggish economy, Secure Jobs has helped 223 homeless parents move to employment in just the first nine months of the initiative. To date, One Family Scholars have earned 256 college degrees. Twenty-seven graduates of the program have even purchased their own homes. Such linkages between housing and workforce and educational services, however, need to be institutionalized across state, regional and local agencies in order to make certain that every homeless family being served by the state has access to both stable housing and the resources to put them on the path to family economic self-sufficiency.

⁴⁸ Woodward interviews.

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