



Commonwealth of Massachusetts

DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Architecture of Proposed System Response to Homelessness

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With the passage of Article 87 by the Massachusetts Legislature, the Emergency Assistance program (EA), including central and field offices where shelter eligibility is determined, is moving from DTA to DHCD. The transfer is slated to be operational on July 1. On that day it will be the DHCD-employed EA worker who responds to a family or individual who walks into one of the 25 DTA offices asking for homeless assistance. That worker will be part of the newly created Division of Housing Stabilization, DHCD's fourth division, joining Community Service, Housing Development and Public Housing.

The Division of Housing Stabilization will oversee the Regional Networks created under the auspices of the Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness (ICHH). Moving EA as well as oversight of the Networks to DHCD provides an opportunity to build a "community of practice" made up of housing and human service professionals, working in tandem with a range of service providers who by developing familiarity with each other's worlds can span the homeless policy and programmatic domains from prevention to re-housing stabilization.

The terms of the stages of homelessness and the policy interventions to keep people housed and rehoused have often shifted meaning over the twenty-five years since the issue became central to the state's policy agenda. As we move to a new era where housing and supportive services are joined in one state Department, it is critical to view a familiar issue through a consistent frame.

In metaphorical form the terms of our framework are as follows:

The EA worker is at the center of a network of organizations and individuals dedicated to homeless prevention, diversion, supported shelter, and stabilized rehousing. That worker lives in a world of four doors.

- **HOMELESS PREVENTION** grounded by the ICHH network encompasses a range of tactics, services and interventions that keep a family away from the EA doors.
- **HOMELESS DIVERSION** or **THE FRONT SCREEN DOOR** provides alternatives to families who present themselves at the EA Office from having to enter the Front Door. A Diversion worker (from a DHCD-contracted agency) works closely with the EA worker and oversees the screen door helping to connect would-be EA clients with pre-shelter resources in the community.
- **THE SHELTER SYSTEM** or **THE FRONT DOOR** provides for access to the EA system **ONLY** when all reasonable and sensible diversion strategies have been exhausted. DHCD now "owns" the shelter contracts. Once inside the front door of the EA office, the family is "sheltered" in the most appropriate place and way.
- **REHOUSING** or **THE BACK DOOR**. DTA's re-procurement requires shelter providers to focus on rapid re-housing and housing stabilization - moving families out the back door of the shelter system in a responsible way to housing, transitional or permanent, which they can hold on to.
- **STABILIZATION** or **THE BACK SCREEN DOOR**. It is one thing to get families out the back door of the shelter system. It is another thing to insure they stay rehoused. Just as there is a diversion worker at the front screen door there will be a networked-individual at the back screen door, most likely the family shelter worker, who connects housing supply to the shelter system to insure stabilization and insure that the family or individual does not have to return to the shelter world.

With a great deal of help from our friends (and networks) on the prevention and stabilization ends, and with the shelter contracts under our wing, DHCD now has central responsibility for the architecture of a systemic response to homelessness. The success of that system is dependent on sustained support from our partners and networks. Prevention is critically important and must be advanced. The four doors and what lies inside them is the domain of a new "community of practice" for professionals who have the capacity to understand and utilize the housing system as well as the support service system in addressing homelessness.