



MAYOR JOSHUA A. GARCIA

CITY OF HOLYOKE

November 18, 2022

Honorable Holyoke City Council
536 Dwight Street
Holyoke MA 01040

Re: City Council Order Regarding Homelessness

Dear Honorable City Councilors:

Please accept this communication as response to your order "*that the city council invite the Mayor, Community Development, Parks & Recreation Department as well as Public health to a Public Safety committee meeting to discuss developing some form of community coalition around addressing homelessness, substance abuse, and youth programming.*"

The City of Holyoke is fortunate to be a partner and financial supporter of a significant existing network addressing homelessness, substance abuse and youth programming. There are dozens of agencies and stakeholders working daily to address these issues. To better understand the complex issues of housing, I implemented a Mayoral Housing Advisory Committee.

Homelessness and Substance Abuse

I. Networks and Coalitions

The City of Holyoke participates in the Western MA Network to End Homelessness meetings on a monthly basis. The network provides advocacy on the state and federal level for housing and homeless resources and provides staffing for local working committees. These committee meetings include a Western Mass Task Force for Housing First group with over 50 regular participants consisting of providers, municipal officials, funders, and more. The Task Force reviews shelter capacity, regional needs, funding opportunities and awards and is solution based. A monthly City/Town Collaboration Meeting focuses on the unique challenges at the municipal level.

The City of Holyoke is a participant in the Hampden County Continuum of Care which provides access to United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) housing and homeless funds through the City of Springfield as the lead entity. The City of Holyoke recently partnered with the CofC on a grant application to provide eight housing navigators in Hampden County with focus on Holyoke. The grant awards will be announced in February 2023.

In partnership with the City of Springfield Office for Housing (the lead for the Hampden County Continuum of Care), the City of Holyoke now has a By-Name list of unsheltered individuals. The list confidentially tracks each individual's journey to housing including case management, substance use needs, access to identification and other factors. A team

meets monthly to review each person on the By Name list to ensure that they are receiving the best possible services. As of November 17, 2022, there are 82 individuals on the Holyoke By-Name list. Some of the 82 are currently housed at Motel 6 and awaiting permanent housing placement.

The Hampden County Sheriff's Department coordinates stakeholders in a monthly HUB meeting to ensure that services are reaching those most in need. The Holyoke Hub is a strategic collaborative involving health and human service professionals working toward creating better outcomes for our city's at-risk population. The HUB is a partnership of 45 local agencies.

II. Services and Street Outreach

The City of Holyoke is fortunate to have a well established network of nonprofits addressing homelessness and addiction on the streets. These providers are working on the streets of Holyoke providing direct care and outreach and include Elliot Services, Tapestry, CHD, Veterans Services Department, BHN, Gandara- Hope for Holyoke, Mercy Hospital's Healthcare for the Homeless, Holyoke Medical Center, Roca, Odyssey House, Viability, and Nueva Vida community re-entry services.

On November 10, 2022, the City of Holyoke offered a Homeless Services Fair to provide a one-stop setting for unsheltered individuals to access a variety of providers. The Fair was a success and will be repeated in December 2022.

Through the CDBG Program, the City funds (in part) the Holyoke Police Department Community Service Center on Race Street offering aid to people struggling with such issues as opioid addiction, homelessness, elder abuse, and other challenges. The detectives work with family members and those impacted by substance use disorders to access housing, detox and other services.

To improve access to services for consumers and providers, CHD has secured a MA DHCD grant to create a telephone hotline that will serve to coordinate access to homeless services. The hotline will be active in April 2023.

To build capacity within City Hall, the City will be adding a full time Housing Navigator position in the FY2024 budget. The Housing Navigator will be the municipal point of contact for homeless and other housing issues and will work closely with the existing community partners and coalitions to connect constituents to the proper services. Currently within City Hall, department heads and employees are acting as housing coaches and social workers- a system that is inefficient and in constant demand. For instance, the Board of Health recently condemned a non-residential building and found two elderly medically fragile men living in deplorable conditions. City staff worked with existing networks to house and obtain care for the men, but the process could be vastly improved with one point of contact. The Housing Navigator will initially be funded by a combination of available revenue sources.

III. Family Homelessness and Shelter

Unsheltered families can access the Commonwealth's Emergency Assistance Shelter Program through MA DHCD. The City of Holyoke is home to dozens of households participating in the EA family shelter system who are primarily housed in apartment blocks.

IV. Unsheltered Individuals and Shelter

Motel 6, Northampton Street provides 48 units of shelter under a contract between MA DHCD and CHD. CHD staffs the shelter 24/7 and provides case management, referrals to services, and housing search assistance. CHD will be opening an additional 48 units of low threshold housing for unsheltered individuals and couples in the next few weeks. Individuals at Motel 6 will be offered an opportunity to move into the low threshold housing, thereby freeing bed space at Motel 6. Once those living in low threshold housing are stable and self-sufficient, they will have opportunities to move to permanent housing. Access to long term housing financial assistance is a key element of these programs. By providing shelter in this step-up model, individuals are afforded the opportunity to develop a stable life foundation with services necessary for successful transition to permanent housing.

In the winter of 2021, the City in partnership with Providence Ministries, the Holyoke Emergency Management Team, and others provided a pop-up warming shelter on the coldest nights. The pop-up warming shelter will be offered again this winter and will utilize Everbridge to notify the public of shelter openings. The pop-warming shelter is held at Providence Ministries and is staffed by trained experienced employees of partner agencies. On-site services include access to treatment, clean clothing, hot meals, basic medical care, showers and warm bedding. The pop-up shelter has served as an entry point into housing for many homeless.

V. Youth Homelessness

The Hampden County Continuum of Care received a HUD grant to address youth homelessness. In a partnership with Gandara, the City of Springfield administers the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) grant. The Holyoke Office for Community Development makes regular referrals to the hotline for young people to access services tailored to them. The hotline is staffed 24hr/day and can be reached at (413) 316-4979.

The Holyoke Public Schools has a full time Manager of Homeless Services and Enrollment-McKinney-Vento Regional Liaison who works with dozens of homeless families and hundreds of homeless children in the HPS system.

VI. Youth Programming

The Parks & Recreation Department has some youth programs already established and is extensively working to build up the offering for the community. The Parks & Recreation Department currently works with a variety of youth sport programs such as Softball, Baseball, Soccer, Field Hockey, Lacrosse, Basketball, Tennis and Football. The department will be looking to collaborate with other departments and programs throughout the city to assist and develop some more sport programs as well as more non athletic recreational programs for the youth of the community. The City has a Youth Development Advisory Group that we are looking to get more involved with, as well as making some efforts to establish a Youth Commission, where together we can increase the number of programs offered for the youth of the city.

The Sheriff's Office is a source for youth programming as well. They have a back to school event, youth sports programs, education engagement, job fairs, and work with religious groups. These are intended to steer at-risk or high-risk youth away from the factors that can lead to addiction and substance abuse.

MassHire also has a pretty robust program for youth employment that helps with applications, resumes, etc to help the youth to work to establish themselves in a working atmosphere.

VII. Preventing Homelessness and Housing Security

One of the keys to preventing homelessness is to ensure that residents are provided with access to resources to maintain their housing stability. The City is currently offering mortgage and rental assistance through Valley Opportunity Council and also makes referrals to the state RAFT Program through Wayfinders. The Board of Health is in communication with Holyoke Gas & Electric about programs to assist residents with gas and electric bills to avoid shut-offs and housing condemnations.

For those impacted by domestic violence, there are several DV providers including Alianza, Valley Opportunity Council and the YWCA. Providers offer emergency assistance, safety planning and shelter.

Families may be forced to make the difficult decision to pay for housing or pay for food. The City has a coalition working on food insecurity including a bimonthly Holyoke Local Resources meeting led by Representative Duffy's office, a Mass In Motion coordinator in the Board of Health, numerous free community meals, and food pantry sites. Community meals are available through Holyoke Medical Center, Kate's Kitchen, the Veterans Meals Program, the Council on Aging, WestMass Eldercare, and more.

For households facing poor housing conditions like lack of heat or sewer service, the City funds the Neighborhood Improvement Program which provides grants for housing rehabilitation. In recent years, NIP grants have been increasingly used to prevent homelessness by averting condemnation due to housing conditions or by averting the cancellation of homeowner's insurance.

There are several fuel and utility assistance programs available in the City. Valley Opportunity and Wayfinders offers state and federally funded programs.

The City of Holyoke has the highest percentage of subsidized housing (outside of Boston) in the Commonwealth. Nearly 20% of all housing units in Holyoke are subsidized which means that there are income restrictions for occupancy. The state average percentage is 10.1% The City has identified over two hundred new rental units in various phases of development. Many of these units will also have income restrictions.

VIII. Substance Use

In discussions with providers and unsheltered individuals impacted by substance use disorders, the repeated message is that detox and remaining clean are highly improbable without housing available immediately upon discharge. It is expected that the low threshold housing units will support recovery by providing housing upon discharge.

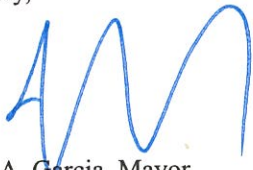
The City of Holyoke is a recipient of annual funds from multi-district litigation that sought abatement funding for damages resulting from opioid marketing and distribution. The City intends to use those funds, in part, to fund the new Housing Navigator Position. This position would refine inter-departmental operations on the City side, work on behalf of

the City to leverage existing private and non-profit substance use and sheltering programming in Holyoke and seek opportunities to improve and streamline those services. The City of Holyoke does not currently have a position or department with the qualifications or oversight necessary to monitor and reconcile the various and often overlapping programming in the community. With a better understanding of what is available for those in need, the City of Holyoke can position itself to resolve current shortcomings or inequities in local programming. The opioid settlement funds are specifically intended to address situations such as this, as well as the myriad of other challenges that this constantly evolving issue presents.

The Holyoke Police Community Center is focused on substance use and recovery. The outreach team provides access to detox and recovery services, support for families, and professional mental health services through its partnership with BHN. Holyoke Medical Center, Holyoke Health Center, Tapestry, River Valley Counseling and Hope for Holyoke all provide related Holyoke-based services.

I trust that this communication addresses your request. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have additional questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'JAG', is positioned above the name of the sender.

Joshua A. Garcia, Mayor

Cc: BOH, Parks and Recreation, OCD