Housing & City Planning

Massachusetts Housing & Shelter Alliance

GROUP REPRESENTATIVES & MENTORS

Joe Finn | President & Executive Director, Massachusetts Housing & Shelter Alliance
Megan Calleja | Director of Development, Massachusetts Housing & Shelter Alliance

BACKGROUND

Recently, much attention was drawn to the "Mass and Cass" homeless crisis in Boston. This was a creation of encampments and swarming of alleged homeless, particularly of those using opioids, within the city blocks surrounding the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Melnea Cass Boulevard.[1] However, the reality of encampments is not only a Boston phenomenon. It is a problem across Massachusetts from Pittsfield to the Cape, and it represents a new manifestation of homelessness in Massachusetts which has always prided itself on having the lowest number of unsheltered in the United States. The cities of both Worcester and Lawrence are struggling with considerable number of people living outdoors.[2] [3] The number of unsheltered persons experiencing homelessness has grown over the last three years.

Homelessness is often perceived as a static problem. People tend to think of those experiencing homelessness as a specific population with specific traits. In reality, it is a heterogeneous population: 80% of that population are so-called transitory homeless. That is, they are not disabled, and transitory homelessness is a short-term experience often caused by some type of socioeconomic emergency. On the other hand, there are those who experience chronic homelessness. These are persons with some type of life limiting disability who are homeless for extended periods of time, and their ability to escape homelessness is often exacerbated by their disability as well as their limited economic viability. While this may be the least of those experiencing homelessness over time, they are the population using most of the resources addressed to homeless persons.

There is little debate today regarding the direct and primary cause of homelessness for both transitory and chronic homeless populations: insufficient housing [4]. The solution to homelessness is creating enough housing opportunities to house everyone. The problem of encampments will not be solved until there is sufficient housing for everyone, regardless of their disabilities or other issues impacting their life. For those experiencing chronic homelessness, who are often the occupants of such encampments, accompanying services are also necessary to support successful tenancies for those who may be drug dependent or suffer from serious mental health issues, or other medical and behavioral issues. Although those experiencing chronic homelessness represent an small part of the population, the lack of housing is a severe social and economic crisis for Massachusetts. "One study estimated Massachusetts's problem is quickly growing, with the need for new homes doubling from 54,000 in 2012 to 108,000 in 2019.[5] A model exists for predicting the necessary housing availability that could reduce the need for chronic homeless persons to be living on the street.[6] Additionally, studies have found that not only is there a shortage of affordable housing units for extremely low-income populations that are the most rent-burdened, but also existing affordable units are growing more and more unaffordable. [9]

Although this analysis has been offered to the Commonwealth, they have refused to act on it. One of the issues they have raised is that the model does not predict the number of newly constructed units necessary to address the issue of chronic homelessness. Quite honestly, such a predictive modeling falls outside the area of expertise of these analysts or MHSA's. MHSA, as well as the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, have currently been unable to predict or project this number and so the creation of such housing continues to follow an arbitrary and random approach, project by project. The difficulty of distinguishing between housing opportunity and new housing construction has never been more critical. It is well known that Massachusetts has an inventory issue related to the inventory of available units. New construction of housing is still needed across all sectors. However, MHSA also knows that there is presently a number of existing units serving homeless individuals that consistently turnover due to people moving, dying, or other reasons for vacating units. The current inventory of such housing seems insufficient to meet the needs of persons experiencing chronic homelessness.

CHALLENGE STATEMENT

The challenge is to develop a predictive model that not only accounts for existing turnover of permanent supportive housing, but also projects the number of new units necessary to create the newly constructed units necessary to achieve "functional zero" in serving the housing needs of the disabled persons experiencing homelessness. Never has such a question been so important [7]. There are more resources than ever in the history of this problem available due to American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding [8] in Massachusetts, including $150 million for permanent supportive housing including $15 million specifically for those projects serving those experiencing chronic homelessness. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts needs a plan to administer these funds most effectively for greatest impact.

KEY CHALLENGE QUESTIONS

- ❖ What are key data components needed as inputs to this model? What existing data sources can be incorporated into this analysis, and what additional data needs to be collected? How difficult would it be to collect this data? We encourage creative use of existing data, and if necessary, include simulations or estimations for data that one would need collect.
- ❖ What is the functional form of this predictive model? Consider location and time effects. How can your model take into consideration different needs for different geographical locations, and how can it be flexible with changing model parameters over time? What are some initial estimates of how many new units are needed and where they are needed the most? How does your model take into account existing units that may experience turnover?
- ❖ How does this model serve the needs of different subgroups of the homeless population? Consider how your estimate or proposal might serve the needs of transitory versus chronic homeless populations, as well as how it might address racial and gender inequities in homelessness.
- ❖ Can you provide an estimate for the cost of building new housing units?
- ❖ What are potential barriers to implementing this system? One of the problems in implementing solutions to homelessness is figuring out how to scale them.

DATA

- **IMPORTANT: Please read through [this existing document](#) for a deeper overview of the topic, as well as an example of how existing data sources were used. The challenge is to build upon this existing analysis to account for not just the number of additional units, but the number of *new* units after accounting for turnover.**
- HUD AHAR data: https://www.hudexchange.info/homelessness-assistance/ahar/#2021-reports
- HUD PIT CoC data: https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/coc-housing-inventory-count-reports/
- Census data: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data.html

[1] https://www.boston.com/news/local-news/2022/07/25/debate-continues-public-health-approach-mass-and-cass/

[2] https://patch.com/massachusetts/worcester/should-worcester-allow-homeless-camp-no-easy-answers-experts-say

[3] https://www.wgbh.org/news/local-news/2022/07/08/lawrence-officials-say-homelessness-cannot-be-answered-municipality-by-municipality

[4] Applying Cluster Analysis to Test a Typology of Homelessness by Pattern of Shelter Utilization: Results from the Analysis of Administrative Data Randall Kuhn,Dennis P. Culhane First published: 01 April 1998 https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022176402357 (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1023/A:1022176402357

[5] https://commonwealthmagazine.org/housing/report-massachusetts-needs-another-108000-homes/#:~:text=But%20Massachusetts's%20problem%20is%20quickly,million%2C%20according%20to%20the%20report

[6] ICHH Committee on Elder and Chronic Homelessness, ICHH Benchmarking Subgroup: Estimating the Need for Additional Housing Opportunities Needed to bring Chronic Homelessness to Functional Zero by 2020 in Massachusetts; see attached. Thomas Byrne, Boston University and Singumbe Muyeba, University of Denver.

[7] The concept of "Functional Zero" seems to vary but generally it has been understood as "that point when a community's homeless services system is able to prevent homelessness whenever possible and ensure that when homelessness does occur, it is rare, brief and one-time."

[8] https://mhsa.net/how-we-help/partnerships-and-programs/mash-arpa-grant application/#:~:text=Overview,production%20of%20permanent%20supportive%20housing

[9] https://www.bostonfed.org/publications/new-england-public-policy-center-policy-report/2019/growing-shortage-affordable-housing-extremely-low-income-massachusetts.aspx