

President's Corner

Local Housing Authorities and our local residents are seeing a direct impact on our ability to provide safe, affordable housing options to the communities we have traditionally served. With the rollout of the new CHAMP statewide waiting list, the majority of our local housing authorities are no longer in the business of being a resource to our local residents who are not experiencing emergencies. Instead, our local housing authorities have become a clearing house for emergency applications statewide leaving us with very limited resources to support the service needs of the community's applicants and residents.



Less than two years ago, an elderly local resident (I will call her Mary), applied to the Chelmsford Housing Authority and was provided with a time frame of about a year or less to come to the top of our list. Mary calls on a regular basis as she cannot afford her property taxes, is isolated and cannot manage to remain in her home. However, our office now informs Mary that the Chelmsford Housing Authority cannot give her an estimated wait time as we only process emergency applications from across the State. Mary feels increased anxiety and frustration as a resource she planned on accessing is really no longer an option.

With the CHAMP system, our agency must process well over 50 applicants from across the State of Massachusetts that have claimed emergency status. The current rate of response from these applicants is about 30%. This means that each agency is dealing with unresponsive applicants 70% of the time. We can lament the high cost of postage and the waste of valuable resources in processing

applicants who are non-responsive. As it now takes much more time to fill vacancies from the CHAMP system, rent is not being collected as vacancy waivers are being requested.

But the real cost is we are no longer serving the residents of our community. When we offered units to our local residents, we knew who they were as they sat at the top of our waiting list for quite some time. We knew when their name came up, that they would be responsive and timely in responding to our requests. With the influx of emergency applicants, our new potential residents are unfamiliar with the community-based services, lack the community connections to assist with a successful transition and more importantly are coming from challenging situations in need of increased resident service coordination.

Emergency applicants who are successful in completing the paperwork and moving in now look to the Local Housing Authority for more than just housing. Our role within the community has transitioned from being an affordable housing provider for our community to being an affordable supportive housing option for applicants in crisis.

While DHCD has committed \$1.5 million for new Resident Coordination to about 40 agencies, well over 40 other local housing authorities will not be funded. If DHCD and the Legislature's goal was to address emergency applicants only, they needed to be prepared for the cost of implementation at the local level as well the strong need for resident service coordination at each agency. In order for us to address the current system, the legislature and DHCD must support an increase in funding of \$1 million in the reform line item of the budget and an increase of \$3 million dollars to provide resident service coordination at each agency.

Even with the increased funding to address the local implementation and resident service needs, we still all must field calls from Mary, our local resident who anticipated moving into her local housing authority. To date, I have no answer for Mary when she asks when she will be able to move in. Sadly, Mary will need to remain out in the community until her situation is so dire that she can be classified as an emergency. She may live to see that day or may just end up being prematurely placed in long term care. This part of the implementation of the CHAMP system has failed our local residents.

(Reprinted from the January/February 2020 edition of the Massachusetts NAHRO newsletter.)