

# METROPOLITAN BOSTON HOUSING PARTNERSHIP



## Preserving Tenancies with the HomeBASE Program: Results for the MBHP Region August 2011 to June 2012

### Purpose and Goals of HomeBASE

HomeBASE is the outgrowth of Massachusetts' efforts to shift from a shelter-based response to family homelessness to a "Housing First" model that keeps families housed through homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing programs, which, before HomeBASE, relied on state Flex Funds and the short-lived federal Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP).

HomeBASE is designed to meet two primary goals related to homelessness in Massachusetts:

- Reduction of the need for shelters and motels by finding families alternative solutions to shelter entry; and
- Immediate and sustained reduction in the number of families who are placed in motels due to lack of shelter capacity.

These goals are rooted in the concept that families are more likely to be able to sustain themselves economically if they are able to maintain their current housing or be re-housed in an apartment quickly rather than having to first be placed in shelter prior to accessing housing assistance. Similarly, it is believed that families have better chances of advancing economically if they do not spend long periods of time in a shelter or motel prior to being re-housed. Working with the Department of Housing and Community Development, in 2009/2010, MBHP used federal HPRP funds to secure housing for more than 250 families who had been homeless and living in motels. Statewide, because of HPRP, the number of families in motels declined during the first half of 2010, but once HPRP funds were expended, new entrants to the shelter system could not be accommodated and the number of families in motels returned to pre-HPRP levels. This increase in shelter demand highlighted the need for a sustained response to homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing.

### HomeBASE Funding

For FY 2012, HomeBASE was initially funded at \$38.6 million (not including \$1.2 million in start up funds allocated in FY 2011), and Emergency Assistance (shelter, including the costs of motels) was funded at \$97.8 million, for total resources of \$136.4 million for Emergency Assistance eligible families. The Massachusetts Legislature then passed supplemental budgets containing an additional \$26.7 million for HomeBASE and \$39.7 million for Emergency Assistance, bringing the final, combined program funding to \$202.8 million.

The recently passed and signed budget for FY 2013 includes a \$18.1 million increase in funding for HomeBASE and a \$40.8 million decrease in funding for Emergency Assistance shelter and motels. The \$180 million combined funding level for these two

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### Our HomeBASE Region:

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programs represents a decline of \$22.7 million.

At the same time, the Legislature and Administration anticipate that increases in three other programs could provide some relief to the shelter system. Rental Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) provides flexible homelessness prevention funds, and has been increased from \$260,000 to \$8.8 million. In addition, funding for the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP) has been increased from \$36 million to \$42 million, providing up to 500 additional families with a long-term rental subsidy. Funding was also increased by \$2 million to state public housing from \$62.5 to \$64.5 million. Combined, these three programs increased \$16.5 million, for total FY 2013 funding of \$115.3 million for these three housing programs.

### Who Did HomeBASE Serve in FY'12?

Last year HomeBASE served a subset of families who were eligible for the Emergency Assistance (EA) program. EA eligibility is the determinant for accessing family shelter. EA requirements included:

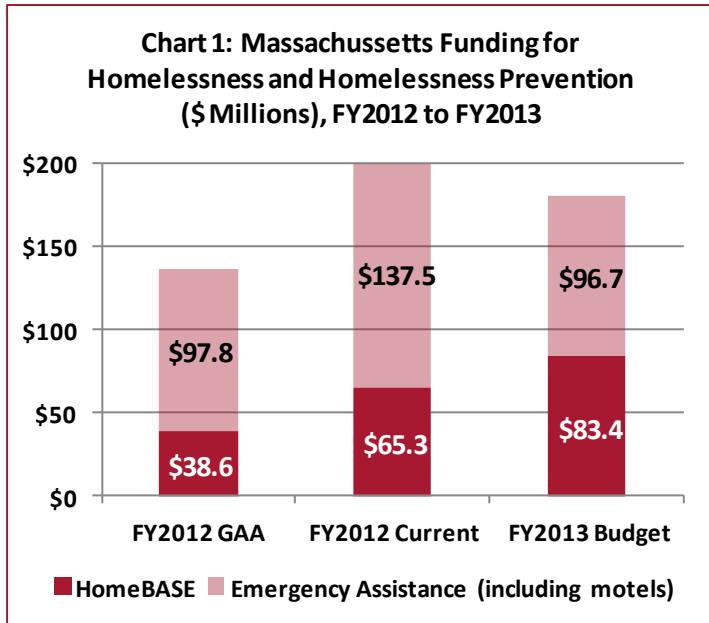
- The family must have an income of less than 115 percent of the Federal Poverty standard (\$18,530 for a family of three in 2011, and \$19,090 in 2012);
- The family must include at least one child under the age of 21, or the head of household is pregnant;
- The family must be homeless due to the lack of feasible, alternative housing; and
- Families must meet additional criteria related to assets, citizenship, previous assistance, and court involvement.

HomeBASE regulations altered the state's response to families seeking shelter. Under this new system, families who were homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness due to Domestic Violence, fire or natural disaster were given the choice of HomeBASE resources or shelter. Families where the head of household was under the age of 21 were only eligible for congregate shelter or a teen living program. Most families who sought shelter and were EA eligible were assessed and offered a HomeBASE response.

### What was a HomeBASE response?

HomeBASE assistance took two forms:

*Household Assistance* provided up to \$4,000 over a 12-month period, which could be used for rental arrearages and utility arrearages, or for certain moving costs



(including out-of-state). These funds could not be used as a shallow rental subsidy.

*Rental Assistance* could include a rental subsidy, as well as a security deposit. Participants paid 35 percent of their gross income toward their rent and utility costs, and were required to participate in at least 12 months of case management. In addition, unit rent and utility costs could not, at least as passed by the Legislature, exceed 80 percent of the Fair Market Rent (FMR) for the Greater Boston region, unless the family received a waiver from the Department of Housing and Community Development as the result of a reasonable accommodation request. The department did issue a universal waiver for rent levels (allowing rents up to 100 percent of HUD FMR) as of August 1, 2011. The FMR for a two-bedroom apartment was \$1,349 in FY 2011 and \$1,369 in FY 2012.

### Changes in the HomeBASE Program

A month after the launch of the program, technical changes were made related to leases, stabilization plans, and temporary accommodations.

At the end of October, a significant change occurred. Rental Assistance was no longer made available for families accessing Emergency Assistance after October 28, 2011. Instead, all new households submitting an application for Emergency Assistance after this date were given the option to choose either shelter or Household Assistance. The majority of families chose to enter shelter, perhaps believing that because of the high cost of housing and their circumstances \$4,000 would not be sufficient to effectively address their housing crises.

One additional, substantial change was made to the program on March 8, 2012. Before this date, the number of bedrooms allowed was extremely restrictive; for example a family consisting of a couple and their two small children only qualified for one bedroom. Recognizing that these families would be under-housed, service agencies sought, and received waivers. After this date, the same family would be eligible for a two-bedroom.

### MBHP's HomeBASE Outcomes

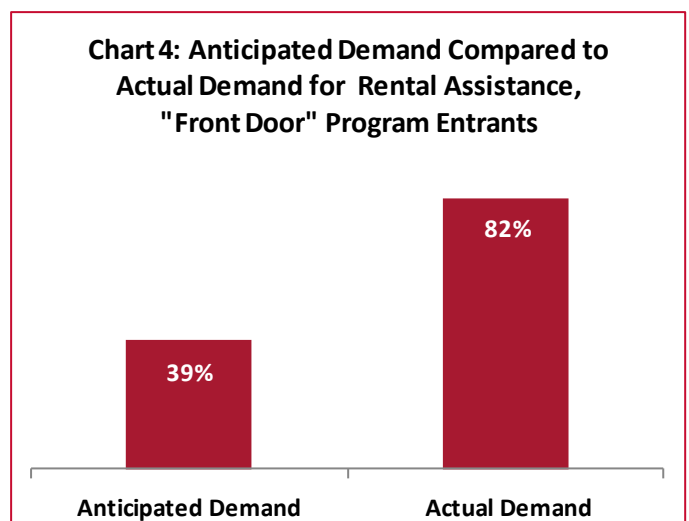
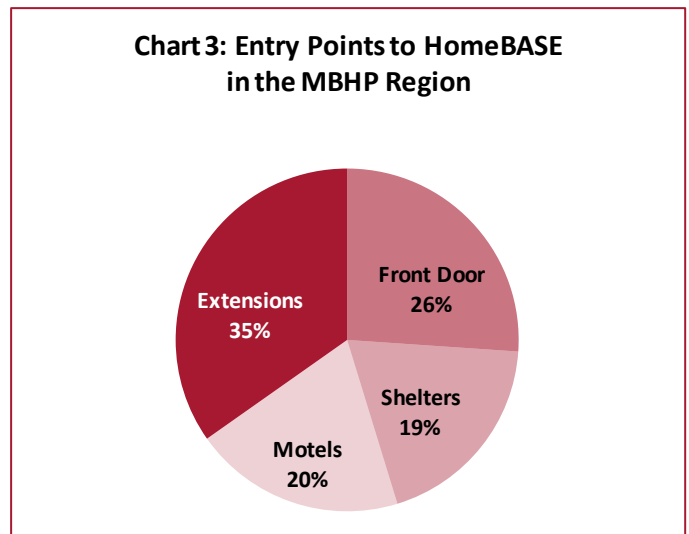
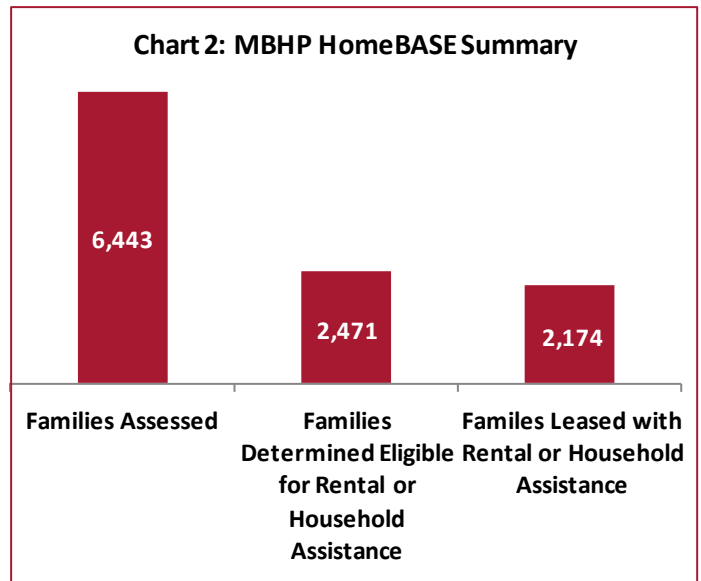
#### Program Utilization

In total, 6,443 Greater Boston families were assessed through four points of entry for eligibility and suitability for HomeBASE. Of these, 2,471 families were determined to be EA/HomeBASE eligible. Those not eligible were usually referred to MBHP's Housing Consumer Education Center (HCEC) and/or other community agencies. A large majority of families not eligible were those that applied for the benefit at the beginning of the program, many believing it was a new, much needed prevention resource rather than a new approach to working with families in need of shelter. The high volume of requests underscore the need for prevention services and resources such as HCECs and RAFT.

MBHP provided 2,174 of these families with HomeBASE financial assistance. All of these families also received housing search and placement services, and case management and stabilization support either directly through MBHP or our subcontractors or partner agency shelter providers. Of the 297 families who did not utilize the resource, 68 percent abandoned the process or were terminated from a motel prior to actualizing the benefit and 30 percent did not implement the benefit prior to the close of the fiscal year. Results of the four points of entry are:

*The "Front Door":* 817 families assessed by HomeBASE staff co-located at one of the three EA offices in the MBHP region (Roxbury/Dudley Square, Malden, or Revere/Chelsea) on or after July 1, 2011 were deemed eligible for HomeBASE and offered Rental Assistance or Household Assistance. 70 percent of these families who were eligible (567 families; 26 percent of families receiving financial assistance) were successfully housed with this assistance. The remainder did not complete the process to access the resource prior to the end of the fiscal year. 82 percent of families received Rental Assistance and 18 percent received Household Assistance. The percent requiring Rental Assistance was more than MBHP's initial estimates of 39 percent, despite the fact that Rental Assistance was discontinued on October 28, 2011.

*Motels:* At the start of HomeBASE on August 1, 2011, there were 501 families residing in 10 motels throughout the MBHP region. Between August 1, 2011 and October 28, 2011, an additional 38 families were placed in these motels. MBHP and our subcontractor Heading Home assessed all 539



families and offered them a HomeBASE resource. As a result, 416 families were successfully housed and moved out of the motels. Of the remaining families, 17 percent abandoned shelter or were terminated, and 6 percent of families remained in motels and did not access the resource. These results effectively closed the motels in our region. Unfortunately, the discontinuation of rental assistance offered at the front door after October 28th resulted in new motel placements that refilled all motel beds in our region. In addition to these results, MBHP assessed 21 other families in two motels in a neighboring region and successfully housed 18 families, for a total of 560 families assessed and 434 families housed, a 78 percent success rate.

*Shelter:* 417 families housed in shelters at the start of HomeBASE were also re-housed with the use of Rental Assistance or Household Assistance. Combined, MBHP re-housed 848 families who had been housed in shelter or motels, thereby exceeding DHCD's goal for MBHP of 816 placements.

*Extensions:* The largest group served were 756 Emergency Assistance eligible families (35 percent of all families served), who had been served by the state with other, temporary subsidy programs including state Flex Funds, the MRVP, and federal HPRP funds before the initiation of HomeBASE, and were transferred to HomeBASE Rental Assistance because despite receiving these temporary funds, they were unable to sustain housing on their own when the subsidy expired and were at substantial risk of becoming homeless again.

When HomeBASE started, it was known that some families would need a temporary place to live to bridge the gap between the offer of a HomeBASE resource and actually locating housing. Initially, MBHP partnered with Middlesex Human Service Agency to secure 40 Temporary Accommodation Placement (TAP) units to accommodate these families. Despite initial rapid turnover (an average of 17 days) the demand was greater than the initial projection and within the first two months of the program an additional 40 units were added. In later stages of the program, time-lines lengthened, to an average of 73-day stays. This increase could have been related to any number of factors, including a tightening of the rental market or the time of year. As the program continued, and with the October 28th change that resulted in no rental assistance and families given the choice of shelter or household assistance, the number of families needing a TAP unit declined. However, given the increase in time each family needed a unit; overall demand for TAP units remained steady.

### *Terminations*

Insufficient time has passed to assess the medium- to long-term outcomes for all HomeBASE participants, but there is data on the number of families who have been terminated from HomeBASE. As of July 1, 2012 only 15 families (less than one percent of those who received assistance) had been terminated for program violations such as non-payment of rent share and/or tenant caused violations resulting in eviction.

### **HomeBASE: Concerns Going Forward**

The FY 2013 increase in HomeBASE funding is welcome, but concerns remain about both the program details and the future of the program.

First, Families eligible for Emergency Assistance must choose between HomeBASE's Household Assistance and shelter. Given high rents (the current two-bedroom Fair Market Rent is \$1,369 in Greater Boston) and the low level of financial assistance, many families have no choice but to choose shelter over Household Assistance, undermining efforts to keep people in homes and out of the expensive shelter/motel system. As of July 1, 2012, 3,648 families remain in the Massachusetts shelter/motel system. Of these, 1,625 were housed in motels. There are currently 449 families placed in 11 motels throughout the MBHP region. There are also 931 families placed in shelters throughout Greater Boston. (continued on page 6)

### **Services Provided**

MBHP subcontracted with six agencies for the HomeBASE program:

- ABCD
- Heading Home
- HomeStart
- Just-A-Start
- Middlesex Human Service Agency
- Project Hope

HomeBASE services included intake and assessment, housing search and placement, rental assistance (including participant education and assessment, administration, and distribution of funds), apartment inspections, and family stabilization.

## Family Story: Household Assistance

Jenny\* is a mom with a 10-year old son who fell behind in her rent when her hours of employment were reduced. She had received a 48-hour notice because she owed more than \$4,000 in arrears on her apartment. She thought she had no options but to give up everything and seek shelter. Fortunately, she was offered an alternative when she applied at the EA office in Malden for emergency shelter—the HomeBASE alternative. After being approved for EA she met with a HomeBASE caseworker from our partner agency Just-A-Start. The case worker spoke to the landlord and negotiated the arrears down to \$4,000 to allow for HomeBASE to help the family retain their tenancy. The landlord then agreed to begin a new lease that also included Jenny’s brother. By adding her brother and his income to the family’s income of about \$900/month from earned income and TAFDC, the family was able to afford the \$1,200 monthly rent going forward.

## Family Story: Rental Assistance

Erin\* is a single mother with a teenage son. When the family moved back home to Massachusetts from South Carolina, they lived with friends while Erin tried to get back on her feet. The small apartment quickly became over-crowded, and Erin and her son were asked to leave. They entered the emergency shelter system. The family was placed at the Charles River Motel in Boston where they lived for more than six months. They were determined eligible for HomeBASE Rental Assistance, and Erin and her son moved out of the motel and into an apartment in Boston.

In many ways the family is thriving- Erin’s son is enrolled in high school in Dorchester and she is finishing her Bachelor’s degree in Public Health from Curry College. She will graduate next spring. Erin also completed MBHP’s new ROOTS (Realizing Our Opportunities Together) Program. This eight-week program provides families who are facing a housing crisis with the tools and the support they need to maintain their homes and become more self-sufficient. The workshop series builds on three areas: financial fitness, housing consumer education, and life planning. In addition to the resources and skills she has gained, she has been able to connect with other parents and built her support network. Additionally, Erin is attending job fairs and is actively seeking full-time employment. Despite these successes, Erin still fears for her family’s future. Her rental assistance is up in a year and she worries about what will come of her family- their future is still unclear.

\*Names have been changed

## Data Sources

*City of Boston Department of Neighborhood Development: HPRP costs*

*Massachusetts Budget & Policy Center: Massachusetts budget figures*

*Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development: Homelessness case load, HomeBASE eligibility, and HomeBASE program guidance*

*Massachusetts Executive Office for Administration and Finance: Budget figures*

*Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership: HomeBASE program data*

*U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Poverty guidelines*

*U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development : Fair Market Rents*

## HomeBASE: Concerns Going Forward (continued)

For families who choose HomeBASE, we are concerned that \$4,000 may not be adequate in this market to secure a safe and sustainable place to live in the Greater Boston area especially for families currently placed in motels or shelters. Although the FY 2012 restriction that prevented Household Assistance from being used as a shallow subsidy has been lifted for FY 2013, \$4,000 is insufficient to address the long-term needs of families at risk for homelessness in the Greater Boston area. Although it is a reasonable amount for families in need of just start up funds or moving assistance, as evidenced in FY 2012, most families are in need of on going rental assistance. As a shallow subsidy, \$4,000 is only sufficient to subsidize an average rent in the Boston area for four to five months.

For example, under the City of Boston's HPRP, families in the homelessness prevention program received, on average, \$5,469 per household for financial assistance. Families were typically three months behind on their rent, and financial assistance largely paid for these rental arrearages, utility arrearages, as well as some shallow, short-term rental subsidies. For families who were already experiencing homeless and were re-housed through MBHP's HPRP, average financial assistance was \$11,223.

For families who are currently receiving HomeBASE rental assistance, we are concerned about what will happen at the end of 24 months of HomeBASE Rental Assistance. Few families are likely to see a substantial income increase in the short-term, and without additional support they could lose their housing.

For families as well as service providers, homelessness is still seen as a doorway for accessing permanent, affordable housing. Given that resources are insufficient to meet the need of every family, and that most families will receive only enough financial support to avoid shelter, this assumption needs to be addressed through outreach and education among service providers and within low income communities. In addition, prevention services and resources must be provided in tandem with continued funding for homeless resources; every family's situation is unique and sometime homelessness is unavoidable.

*In conclusion*, as implemented, MBHP believes resources were well invested. HomeBASE lead to stable housing for more than 2,000 families in the Greater Boston region who had been in motels, shelters, or were otherwise likely to enter shelter. MBHP believes that if rental assistance had remained a resource throughout the balance of the fiscal year, a tipping point of demand and placements would have been reached, thereby greatly reducing at least the need for motel beds as "overflow" shelter beds.

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