



**Boston City Council Public Hearing
Tuesday, August 18, 2020 @ 10:00 a.m.
Dockets: #0218 and #0587¹**

**Testimony of Chris Norris, Executive Director
Metro Housing|Boston**

Metro Housing serves households in Boston and 32 surrounding communities. We administer housing vouchers for 10,000 families. We work with residents to address housing crises. We provide emergency rental assistance using the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition program that issued payments totaling \$5.1 million to 1,800 households last year, of which \$3.3 million was spent in Boston to prevent 1,200 families from becoming homeless. More recently, we have been asked by different municipalities (Boston, Braintree, Milton, and Revere) to administer their new programs that provide assistance to prevent evictions caused by impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In April, we were asked to work with the city to develop a “COVID-19 Rental Relief Fund” that would distribute emergency funds provided by the city to Boston residents. We received our first referrals on May 1, and the first payments were made on May 8. As of August 14, Metro Housing had approved \$908,976 in payments, serving 269 households.

The City of Boston’s Rental Relief Fund is a true partnership. Metro’s staff members and the team at the Department of Neighborhood Development communicate regularly. We have an excellent working relationship and can make program adjustments quickly based on feedback and experience. We also work together on the intensive outreach to residents who have expressed interest in the program. This has involved e-mail messages and follow-up phone calls.

We know that the programs we administer are only effective if people are aware of them and if they can be accessed. Metro Housing uses different methods to increase awareness of our programs and services to prevent evictions across the region. In July, we sent more than 1,100 hardcopy letters with RAFT flyers to elected officials, houses of worship, and service providers. We followed up with 6,500 e-mail messages. We also tested targeted social media ads that reached almost 23,000 people in parts of our region, and in August we offered training to 71 service providers. Numerous media mentions have occurred since the start of the fiscal year, including a story in the East Boston Times on July 8 and a Boston Neighborhood Network story on July 17.

¹ #0218 – Order for a hearing to discuss ways to support tenants facing eviction and displacement.
#0587 – Order for a hearing regarding the creation of temporary rental assistance to support residents impacted by COVID-19.

Access is one of our top priorities, and language is a key element of access. Metro Housing has 160 staff members. Sixty-seven of them can provide assistance in at least one language other than English. In fact, we cover 19 different languages and have 32 staff members who interpret or translate Spanish. The location of services is also important, and that is why we work with groups such as the East Boston Neighborhood Health Center and Caribbean Integration Community Development. We also have staff members working with other partner organizations at six colocation sites across the city, and we make it easy to get information to us by regular mail, e-mail, FAX, or by leaving it in the drop-box in our lobby.

One benefit of working with Metro Housing|Boston is our Housing Consumer Education Center. With the HCEC, we offer a variety of different services to meet the myriad housing needs residents face. For example, Boston residents who receive Rental Relief funding who need additional assistance can, if needed, apply for RAFT funds after exhausting the city money, and people who expressed interest in the city Rental Relief Fund but who were ineligible because they were not Boston residents received RAFT application information as an alternative.

We want to help as many people as possible as quickly as possible. It is also important to maintain program integrity – ensuring that funds are distributed to people in need who meet the defined program eligibility requirements. Working with the city, we have streamlined the application process and reduced the required information. We have also attempted to maintain flexibility when it comes to documentation such as sources of income, loss of income, and the housing crisis.

Massachusetts and the City of Boston are leaders when it comes to preserving tenancies. Available data and anecdotal information tell us the need for emergency rental assistance exists. For example, since July 1 Metro Housing has spent \$1.5 million on RAFT, 50% of our annual contracted allocation. This represents a 264% increase when compared to the \$412,000 we spent during the same time period last year.

One thing that has surprised us is that not everyone who initially expresses interest in seeking emergency rental assistance actually completes an application. This phenomenon is not limited to the city's program. We see it across the different programs that we administer – people request an application but do not return it, or they may start an application but then do not provide supporting materials or do not respond to repeated requests or outreach attempts. The eviction and foreclosure moratorium and the additional unemployment benefits that were being paid through the end of July are good; however, they have probably given people a greater sense of security and reduced the urgency that would have otherwise existed. This raises significant concerns about what might happen over the next few months, particularly if the federal

government does not step forward or the state does not promptly release the new COVID-19 RAFT funding passed by the legislature and signed by the governor.

For 37 years, Metro Housing has worked to stabilize housing for those in need. We are ready to do what we can, and we want to work with you, the members of the Boston City Council, to be sure that every step we take is as effective as possible.

Thank you.