

ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS IN CAMBRIDGE, MA

Recommendations from a Community Conversations Process

JANUARY 2022

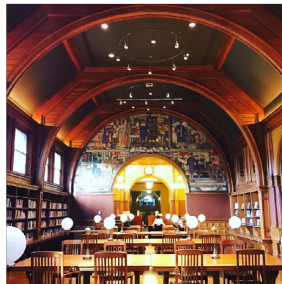
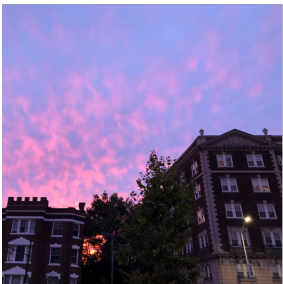


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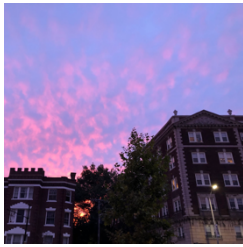
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In May 2021, the City of Cambridge engaged [jo consulting](#) to facilitate a series of community conversations to develop recommendations for how the city can better work to prevent and end homelessness. Jeff Olivet and Donald Whitehead facilitated the conversations, and Jeff Olivet served as lead author of this report. Donald and Jeff were supported by an exceptional expert team: Matthew Aronson, Alice Colegrove, Lauren Leonardis, and Ayala Livny.

The team would like to thank all members of the City of Cambridge Ad Hoc Working Group on Homelessness, who contributed significant hours, wisdom, and thoughtful guidance to shape the process and recommendations. The working group was appointed by Mayor Sumbul Siddiqui, who designated Councillor McGovern to spearhead the initiative. This work would not have been possible without Mayor Siddiqui's and Councillor McGovern's deep commitment to ensuring that all Cambridge residents have a safe, stable, affordable place to call home.

Our deepest gratitude goes to those unhoused individuals who offered their time and expertise through interviews, focus groups, and participation on the Ad Hoc Working Group. We will never end homelessness until those who are closest to the problem—those with lived experience of homelessness—are fully included in creating the solutions.

BACKGROUND



Homelessness is a life and death crisis. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, as in communities across the United States, homelessness has remained a persistent public health crisis for decades. Despite great success in ending homelessness one

individual, one family, one youth and young adult at a time, we have yet to scale effective solutions to the extent necessary to end homelessness once and for all. Further, we have done little to stem the tide of people newly becoming homeless. The net result is that while we have created effective housing and service solutions that have immeasurable benefit to those who receive them, we fail to solve the homelessness crisis systemically.

On any given night, more than 500 of our friends and neighbors in Cambridge have no home, and this number increases many-fold through the course of a year. A disproportionately high percentage of those experiencing homelessness in Cambridge are people of color:¹

- 40% of people experiencing homelessness in Cambridge are Black/African American, compared to 11% of the general population, a disproportionality of more than three and a half times the general population numbers
- 62% of families experiencing homelessness in Cambridge are Black/African American
- Hispanic/Latino residents make up 19% of the city's homeless population overall—and 33% of homeless families—compared to just 9% of the general population

Even when controlling for poverty, rates of homelessness for Black and Latino households in Cambridge are dramatically high. Further, the crisis of homelessness has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has further destabilized health, well-being, and economic opportunity for many in our community.

Over the past several years, the city has undertaken efforts to address the city's homelessness crisis. In 2015-16, for example, the city partnered with the Corporation for

Supportive Housing to lead a “charrette”—a community planning process to identify strategies to prevent and end homelessness. The process resulted in recommendations related to housing, supportive services, zoning, and other strategies.²

Additionally, in June 2020, in the wake of George Floyd's murder, the City of Cambridge launched the City Manager's Public Safety Task Force, which developed a set of recommendations³ that included guidance on how law enforcement can play a constructive role in addressing the needs of unhoused individuals.

Building on these efforts, the city launched an Ad Hoc Working Group on Homelessness in June 2021, with the purpose of holding a series of community conversations that would result in a set of recommendations to guide future homelessness policy.⁴ From July-September 2021, these facilitated conversations addressed:

1. Current services being offered by non-profit service providers and city-funded programs
2. Best practices and policy directions from across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts
3. National trends in homelessness response

Concurrent with the community conversations, the team from jo consulting engaged unhoused individuals through a series of focus groups and interviews. In all, we interviewed 15 individuals and held three focus groups—one in person and two via Zoom—that included a total of 18 individuals with lived experience of homelessness.

Finally, we conducted individual interviews with Ad Hoc Working Group members to solicit their input on recommendations. Thirteen workgroup members participated in one-on-one interviews.

After completing these activities, we held two strategy sessions with the Ad Hoc Working Group to discuss potential strategies and directions.

This report presents what we learned from the process and recommendations for future funding, policy, and programming to address Cambridge's homelessness crisis.

¹ Data Sources: Cambridge Continuum of Care Point-in-Time Count; U.S. Census Bureau *American Community Survey*

² The August 2016 Charrette Recommendations are available at https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5fb554c6bcf4c950ed250c4f/t/5fb6d944771cab1816f1d5b8/1605818693410/Cambridge_Charrette_Recs_2016.pdf

³ Public Safety Task Force Recommendations are available at: <https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/citymanagersoffice/citymanager/taskforcetoeaminefutureofpublicsafetyincambridge/finalreportoftaskforce2021.pdf>

⁴ See Appendix A for list of Ad Hoc Workgroup members and Appendix B for meeting agendas, including expert presenters.

WHAT WE LEARNED



The community conversations process was designed to build upon previous efforts and to move quickly from assessment to recommendations. The groups that engaged in the community conversations, focus groups, and interviews brought a wealth of

perspectives to the problem. These perspectives shed light on multiple dimensions of the homelessness response in Cambridge—both things that are working well and things in need of improvement. This section highlights key findings and provides background and justification for the recommendations that follow.

PERSPECTIVE OF UNHOUSED RESIDENTS

Focus groups members and interview participants described past experiences that left them with **difficulty trusting programs and service providers**:

“I just don’t trust openly...[don’t] even want to ask you for help.”

“I have a hard time humbling myself. I think I can do it on my own.”

“[Previous services, not homeless services in Cambridge] really screwed me over...I was left with a bad taste in my mouth.”

“Just getting started is overwhelming.”

These experiences emphasize the **importance of outreach and relationship-building** to connect with people and build trust. They also highlight the need for low-threshold programs that meet people “where they are,” empower people, and connect them with housing and supports they want and need.

One focus group participant described the isolation and loneliness of being homeless:

“...the sheer boredom...once you’ve done everything you need to do in a day and if you have nothing else to do, all you’re left is depending on who you are.”

It is not only housing and services—but also **social connectedness**—that is needed to address homelessness.

Several individuals discussed the **need for basic services and supports**, including:

- Need for an “all-inclusive drop-in center open 24 hours”
- More access to public showers
- More access to public restrooms
- Access to charging phones

Multiple individuals described the **need for lockers**.

According to one participant:

“The fact that you have to carry everything with you is seriously detrimental to getting anything done. You have to carry your bedding around. You can’t leave it anywhere, so you can’t even go into an appointment.”

They also described in powerful terms the barriers they face in trying to access **safe, stable, and affordable housing** in Cambridge:

“I have all these people helping me, but it’s taking a long time.”

“I need to have letters of where I’ve been for the past 3 years. It’s been tough because I was outside, and there’s no proof for that. I need to get it quick, so I don’t miss this opportunity.”

“I have a voucher, but landlords don’t want to rent to me.”

People experiencing homelessness in Cambridge voice the need for immediate supports to survive homelessness, as well as long-term supports, such as access to permanent housing, to end their homelessness.

PERSPECTIVE OF LOCAL, STATEWIDE, AND NATIONAL EXPERTS

Throughout the community conversations, we invited local and national experts to share their insights on trends and best practices for addressing homelessness.⁵ They shared strategies to address homelessness among Veterans, youth and young adults, families, and single adults.

The group heard from local service providers, advocates, and Continuum of Care (CoC) staff about effective models already being implemented in Cambridge. They received statewide updates from coalition leaders and state

⁵ Experts are listed by name in the meeting agendas in Appendix B.

consultants on advocacy and service trends across Massachusetts, including significant work to address youth homelessness. The presenters also focused significant time on the importance of **upstream homelessness prevention**, a topic the group agreed was of high importance.

Among national trends the presenters highlighted were:

1. **Racial Equity.** The national discourse around homelessness has turned increasingly towards understanding the racial inequities at play in who becomes homeless, and towards centering racially equitable solutions in our homelessness response.
2. **Lived Experience.** Communities across the country are increasingly striving to engage people with lived experience of homelessness, not just in receiving services, but also in crafting policy and developing programs that will be most effective in meeting the needs of those most impacted.
3. **Housing Solutions.** Ultimately, homelessness is a housing issue. The evidence base continues to grow for permanent supportive housing, Housing First with supportive services available, targeted eviction prevention, and other interventions. It is critical that Cambridge work to scale these effective solutions to meet the need.
4. **Direct Cash Transfers.** An emerging trend in responding to youth homelessness and homelessness among other groups is the practice of “direct cash transfers” that ensure adequate income for people to make their own decisions about housing and other basic needs. Such programs have precedent in communities across the U.S., the United Kingdom, and elsewhere, and are gaining traction as a key element of effective homelessness response systems.

After each of the presentations, the group had the opportunity to share their own experiences and to engage with one another and with the presenters in robust discussion about each key topic.

PERSPECTIVE OF AD HOC WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

In the large group meetings and in one-on-one interviews, working group members offered important perspectives on strategies and priorities to address homelessness in Cambridge. Members identified numerous gaps in the current housing and services continuum, including:

- Need to engage people with lived experience more authentically
- Need for better coordination/information
- Need for a “Homelessness Czar”
- Storage options for people
- Low-threshold 24-hour drop-in center(s)
- Supervised consumption/injection sites
- Greater access to mental health and substance use treatment
- Wider range of housing options
- Wrap-around supports, particularly when someone moves into housing
- Landlord outreach/engagement
- Direct Cash Transfers to provide basic income for people experiencing homelessness

Group members suggested that while the city, advocates, and non-profit partners have created many strategies to support emergency needs, **the community has yet to scale effective solutions** at the level necessary to end homelessness for good. According to one interviewee:

“We excel at emergency response, but there is a shadow side...we can’t do anything long-term.”

Others emphasized the **need to reframe the narrative** around homelessness:

“The public perceptions of homelessness are so wrong. I have never met a more compassionate, kind, generous group of people than those I’ve met on the street.”

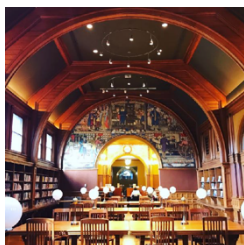
“We look on poor people as a threat to our property values...how do we reframe it so everyone wins?”

The importance of working to **build political and public will** to address homelessness in a more systematic, solution-oriented way was prevalent throughout our discussions.

The group also made clear that Cambridge—with its proximity to Boston, Somerville, and other neighboring communities—cannot solve homelessness alone. Instead, a **regional approach** is essential to address the immediate homelessness crisis and the long-term solutions related to housing and supportive services. As one group member succinctly put it,

“Homelessness doesn’t have a border.”

RECOMMENDATIONS



Based on the process of community conversations, interviews and focus groups, and review of past recommendations, we facilitated two strategy sessions with the Ad Hoc Working Group in November 2021. From these sessions, a series of recommendations emerged that can be grouped into four broad areas:

1. Homelessness Prevention
2. Emergency Response
3. Permanent Solutions
4. Cross-Cutting Strategies

The chart below outlines short-term (0-6 months), medium-term (6-18 months), and long-term (1-3 years) strategies for each area.

Area of Focus	Short-Term Recommendations	Medium-Term Recommendations	Long-Term Recommendations
1. Homelessness Prevention	<p>1.1 Ensure that emergency rental assistance gets to those at imminent risk of homelessness</p> <p>Note: This recommendation will require close collaboration between the Continuum of Care, the Department of Human Service Programs, homeless service providers, and the City of Cambridge COVID-19 Housing Stabilization Program to develop strategies to reach those at imminent risk of homelessness.</p>	<p>1.3 Create strategies for early detection of homelessness risk (consider additional data collection to better understand pathways into homelessness) and explore promising interventions such as shelter-based diversion</p>	<p>1.5 Collaborate with state services and non-profits to increase access to mental health/substance use services</p> <p>Note: This recommendation will require an assertive effort on the part of the city and its non-profit partners to meet with and develop concrete strategies for collaboration with the state Department of Mental Health and Bureau of Substance Addiction Services.</p>
	<p>1.2 Develop a comprehensive homelessness prevention strategy</p> <p>Note: The city should lead this effort, either through continuing the work of the Ad Hoc Working Group or creating a specific group to work on prevention. Stakeholders should include individuals with lived expertise of homelessness, housing and service providers, city officials, the housing authority, and partners from other sectors (e.g., health, behavioral health, child welfare/foster care, domestic violence, and others)</p>	<p>1.4 Increase linkages between housing, healthcare, and mainstream services</p>	<p>1.6 Collaborate with stakeholders to better understand and decrease discharges from other systems of care, and increase linkages and coordination with state and other systems of care to create upstream prevention strategies</p>
2. Emergency Response	<p>2.1 Create low-threshold 24-hour drop-in center(s) across the city to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bathrooms and showers - Storage - Places to charge phones <p>Note: While we understand that implementation may take more than</p>	<p>2.5 Increase weekend hours for services</p>	<p>2.10 Explore the feasibility of supervised drug/alcohol consumption sites if/when law allows</p>

	6 months to complete, we do recommend moving quickly to begin the process.		
	<p>2.2 Ensure that shelters are low threshold and flexible enough to meet the needs of couples and people with pets</p> <p>Note: A specific goal could be to identify a shelter provider that will make accommodations for pets no later than the end of 2022.</p>	<p>2.6 Create more flexible transitional housing options and congregate housing options with real shared living spaces</p> <p>Note: A specific goal could be to have at least one congregate housing site developed and online within 3 years.</p>	
	<p>2.3 Increase number of housing navigators</p> <p>Note: This recommendation will require some analysis to determine the number of new navigators sufficient to meet the need.</p>	<p>2.7 Increase street outreach coverage and coordination among providers</p> <p>Note: This may involve adding additional staffing and hours to existing programs like First Step.</p>	
	<p>2.4 identify a person within the Cambridge Police Department and within ISD to ensure that belongings that are confiscated from homeless persons or encampments are kept in the cage for 72 hours before they are disposed of; provide contact information for the person responsible in shelters, with outreach workers, and on information boards</p>	<p>2.8 Implement Critical Time Intervention model— multidisciplinary teams that engage with people as they transition from homelessness to housing</p> <p>Note: Much work was done pre-pandemic in this area, so this recommendation should be able to move quickly.</p>	
		<p>2.9 Create non-police crisis response team</p> <p>Note: The city is already moving forward with this proposal.</p>	
3. Permanent Solutions	<p>3.1 Move quickly to distribute emergency housing vouchers in a racially equitable way to people experiencing and at imminent risk of homelessness</p> <p>Note: This recommendation will require close collaboration between the Continuum of Care, the Department of Human Service Programs, homeless service providers, and the Cambridge Housing Authority to develop strategies to ensure there are no racial disparities in voucher distribution and utilization.</p>	<p>3.4 Launch public awareness campaign to decrease stigma, dispel myths, and reframe the issue of homelessness in a “disaster response framework”</p>	<p>3.7 Significantly increase number of permanent supportive housing units (PSH), including options for shared housing and congregate settings</p>
	<p>3.2 Increase stabilization services and availability of wrap-around services to support people who have moved into housing</p>	<p>3.5 Develop strategies for landlord engagement to reduce discrimination and increase voucher usage</p>	<p>3.8 Develop a comprehensive strategy to significantly increase the stock of affordable housing units across the city; explore the feasibility and potential</p>

4. Cross-Cutting Strategies

<p>Note: This could be covered by Critical Time Intervention teams (see 2.7) if staffing levels are adequate to meet the need.</p>		<p>impact of a time-limited moratorium on market-rate housing development to focus on creating low-income housing; examine whether this strategy has worked in other communities</p>
<p>3.3 Initiate and support direct cash transfer programs</p> <p>Note: Y2Y is already participating in BayCash demonstration; the city and its partners should explore the feasibility and resources needed to launch similar pilots for families and individuals.</p>	<p>3.6 Create city-wide strategy to reduce social isolation for people experiencing homelessness</p>	<p>3.9 Explore national best practices for serving all sub-groups: families, youth, single adults, Veterans, LGBTQ+ people, and others</p>
<p>4.1 Formalize opportunities for people with lived expertise to shape decisions</p>	<p>4.4 Consider creating a "homelessness czar" position for the city to ensure shared vision and coordinated response</p> <p>Note: This recommendation goes hand-in-hand with 4.5 below.</p>	<p>4.7 Create regional strategies to address homelessness, including regional coordinating bodies, data-sharing and increased linkages with healthcare through Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs), Community Support for Persons Experiencing Chronic Homelessness (CSPECH), and other regional entities</p>
<p>4.2 Increase coordination by consolidating and streamlining various community meetings and groups</p> <p>Note: Existing meetings occur regularly among the CoC, outreach organizations, and others. A first step will be to develop a list of existing groups and meetings, then examine their purposes to determine areas of overlap and potential consolidation.</p>	<p>4.5 Consider creating an "office of homelessness response" within city government</p> <p>Note: The city and its partners will need to define the scope of what this office would provide and funding plan to determine budget and staffing. While the consulting team envisions this as a policy, coordinating, and accountability office rather than a provider of direct services, some communities, such as King County Regional Homelessness Authority, serve both purposes.</p>	<p>4.8 Eliminate racial disparities in homelessness numbers and housing outcomes (data tracking, setting targets, monitoring outcomes)</p>
<p>4.3 Consider making the Ad Hoc Working Group on Homelessness permanent</p>	<p>4.6 Increase access to information for unhoused people and the broader community about where to go for what resources. For example, the city and its partners could ensure that a consolidated website and three physical locations will be identified to provide information that is verified and updated on a weekly basis</p>	<p>4.9 Engage the universities and biotech industry more fully to respond to homelessness (funding, research, data)</p>

While any one of these recommendations alone will not solve homelessness, taken together, they create a roadmap for how to create a comprehensive plan that not only meets the needs of people who are currently experiencing homelessness in our community, but also turns off the flow of additional individuals and families into homelessness. Such a comprehensive response will result in a stronger, more compassionate community in which we can live together—with all our friends and neighbors in their own homes rather than on the streets or in shelters.

CONCLUSION



This report is a snapshot in time. It attempts to capture the work of the City of Cambridge Ad Hoc Working Group on Homelessness in the context of the ongoing pandemic and the ongoing crisis of homelessness in our community and across the county. While the

pandemic has exacerbated racial and economic inequities, these problems existed long before the emergence of COVID-19 in early 2020.

The City of Cambridge, along with the faith community, non-profit providers, and advocates have long worked to provide emergency services for unhoused people in the community. Less effective have been the efforts to develop lasting solutions at the scale necessary—not only to meet the needs of the 500+ people who are homeless in Cambridge on any given night, but also to stem the tide of new homelessness.

The recommendations offered here provide numerous pathways to build upon existing strategies and to implement new strategies that are based on national models and emerging research.

We understand the challenging context in which the city and non-profit service providers are operating. COVID has had a profound impact on staffing and resources, and it has created challenges opportunities related to these recommendations in this document: there is COVID relief funding that can be used to implement some of the recommendations, but the stakeholders needed to implement recommendations are largely in crisis mode and hiring has been difficult. The city and its partners will continue to have to navigate these challenges going forward.

A permanent end to homelessness in our community will require political will, public support, and a redoubling of our collective commitment to create a community in which housing is a basic human right, a community where no one experiences homelessness for even one night.

APPENDIX A: AD HOC WORKING GROUP ON HOMELESSNESS MEMBERS

The table below lists the members of the Ad Hoc Working Group and their affiliations.

Name	Affiliation
Mary Althoff	Community Member
Branville G. Bard	Commissioner, Cambridge Police Department
Christine Elow	Commissioner, Cambridge Police Department
John Chute	Community Member
Louie DePasquale	City Manager
Adam Dyer	First Parish Unitarian-Universalist
Nikolas Emack-Bazelais	City of Cambridge
Cassie Hurd	Material Aid and Advocacy Program
Denise Jillson	Harvard Square Business Association
Mike Johnston	Director, Cambridge Housing Authority
Adrienne Klein	Constituent Support Manager, Mayor's Office
Kate Layzer	Minister of Street Outreach, First Church
Jennifer Mathews	Assistant to the City Manager
Marc McGovern	Cambridge City Councilor
Mark McGovern	Healthcare for the Homeless
Elizabeth Mengers	Planning & Development Manager, Cambridge Continuum of Care
Michael Scarlett	Chief of Staff to Mayor Siddiqui
Michael Monestime	Central Square Business Improvement District
Maura Pensak	Housing Liaison, City of Cambridge
Robert Lowe	Superintendent, Cambridge Police Department
Ellen Semonoff	Assistant City Manager Department Human Services Programs
Sumbul Siddiqui	Mayor, City of Cambridge
Jivan Sobrinho-Wheeler	Cambridge City Councilor
Franny Wu	Project Right to Housing
Theresa Young	Director, CASPAR Emergency Services at Baycove

APPENDIX B: AD HOC WORKING GROUP AGENDAS/EXPERT PRESENTERS

This appendix includes agendas for the Ad Hoc Working Group on Homelessness, along with names of expert presenters who met with the group at each meeting.



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE Ad Hoc Working Group on Homelessness

Community Conversation # 1

Thursday July 8 5:30 – 7:30 pm

Agenda:

1. Welcome and Introductions (Councilor Marc McGovern)
2. Purpose and Overview of Today's Session (Jeff Olivet)
3. **Presentation: Liz Mengers, Planning & Development Manager, Cambridge Continuum of Care**
4. Discussion (Donald Whitehead)
5. **Presentation: Teresa Young, Director of CASPAR Emergency Services at Baycove**
6. Discussion (Jeff Olivet)
7. **Presentation: Kate Layzer, Minister of Street Outreach, First Church**
8. Discussion (Donald Whitehead)
9. Small Group Breakouts (Jeff Olivet)

Questions to Discuss:

- What did you learn from the presentations?
- What do you want to learn more about?
- What are you seeing, from your work, as gaps in the current homelessness response?

10. Debrief (Donald Whitehead)
11. Next Steps and Adjourn (Councilor Marc McGovern)



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
Ad Hoc Working Group on Homelessness

Community Conversation #2

Thursday July 29, 5:30 – 7:30 pm

Agenda

1. Welcome and Introductions (Councilor Marc McGovern)
2. Purpose and Overview of Today's Session (Jeff Olivet)
3. **Presentation: Jassie Senwah, Transition House Director of Housing Services and Genessis Guzman-Betancourt, Transition House Housing Search Coordinator**
4. Discussion (Donald Whitehead)
5. **Presentation: Cameron Van Fossen, Executive Director, Y2Y**
6. Discussion (Donald Whitehead)
7. **Presentation: Neil MacInnis-Barker, Director of Veterans' Services, City of Cambridge**
8. Discussion (Donald Whitehead)
9. Large Group Synthesis
 - Questions to Discuss:
 - What did you learn from the presentations?
 - What do you want to learn more about?
 - What are you seeing as gaps in the current homelessness response?
10. Adjourn (Councilor Marc McGovern)

Upcoming Dates:

Session 3: Tuesday 8/17, 5:30 – 7:30 pm

Session 4: Thursday 8/19, 5:30 – 7:30 pm



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
Ad Hoc Working Group on Homelessness

Community Conversation #3

Thursday, September 23, 5:30 – 7:30 pm

Agenda

1. Welcome and Introductions
2. Purpose and Overview of Today's Session
3. Update on Inclusion of People with Lived Experience of Homelessness
4. Plan for Interviews with Workgroup Members
5. **Presentation: Matthew Aronson, Matthew Aronson Consulting**
6. Discussion
7. **Presentation: Donald Whitehead, National Coalition for the Homeless and Racial Equity Partners**
8. Discussion
9. **Presentation: Jeff Olivet, Racial Equity Partners and jo consulting**
10. Discussion
11. Large Group Synthesis
 - Questions to Discuss:
 - What did you learn from the presentations?
 - What do you want to learn more about?
 - What are you seeing as gaps in the current homelessness response?
12. Adjourn

Upcoming Dates:

Session 4: Tuesday, September 28, 5:30 – 7:30 pm



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
Ad Hoc Working Group on Homelessness

Community Conversation #4: A Statewide Perspective

Tuesday, September 28, 5:30 – 7:30 pm

Agenda

1. Welcome and Introductions
2. Purpose and Overview of Today's Session
3. Plan for Interviews with Workgroup Members
4. **Presentation: Ayala Livny and Alice Colegrove, consultants**
5. Discussion
6. **Presentation: Kelly Turley, associate director, Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless**
7. Discussion
8. Large Group Synthesis

Questions to Discuss:

- What did you learn from the presentations?
- What do you want to learn more about?
- What are you seeing as gaps in the current homelessness response?

9. Adjourn

Upcoming Dates:

- **Watch for scheduling email for individual work group interviews and strategy sessions**