

**Chairperson**  
Aaron Richman



**Members:**

Lilian Chukwurah  
Izaida Gonzalez  
Robyn Kennedy  
Edward G. Robinson  
Elizabeth O'Callahan

**Vice-chairperson**  
Cara Berg Powers

**City of Worcester  
Human Rights Commission**

**Monday, December 4th, 2017, 6pm  
Worcester City Hall, Esther Howland Chamber**

**Members Present:** Aaron Richman, Cara Berg Powers, Robyn Kennedy, Izaida Gonzalez, Lilian Chukwurah, Edward G. Robinson, Elizabeth O'Callahan

**Staff Present:** Jayna Turchek, Kathy Esparza, Katherine Calano and Joelle Dumont

**1. Call to Order and Introductions**

A quorum was established and Chairperson Aaron Richman called the meeting to order at 6:24pm. Commissioners introduced themselves. The Chairperson welcomed the Commissioners and those present.

**2. Approval of November 6th, 2017 meeting minutes**

Vice-Chairperson Berg Powers motioned to approve the minutes as written. Commissioner Robinson seconded.

**3. New Business:**

**A. City of Worcester initiatives to prevent and address homelessness (Economic Development and Health and Human Services)**

- Katherine Calano, Homeless Project Coordinator, presented a report detailing statistics and systemic causes of homelessness, as well as structural challenges facing the homeless population. Current policy proposals outlined steps toward solutions to reduce homelessness in Worcester.
- The most effective solutions aim to prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place.
- These include: counseling, eviction mediation, flexible financial support, and family emergency housing. Additional resource information made available on the Central Ma Housing Alliance handout
- Department of Housing and Urban Development outlines 4 categories in the federal definition of homelessness: 1 – Literally Homeless, 2 – Imminent Risk of Homeless, 3 – Homeless Under Other Federal Statutes, 4 – Fleeing/Attempting to Flee DV

**Statistics:**

1,111 homeless in Worcester  
38.5% homeless adults in Worcester experience mental illness  
25.% experience Substance Abuse Disorder



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1.7% report living with HIV/Aids  
14.7% are survivors of domestic violence

### **Department background**

- This a new office within the department
- Focus on integration with the health system
  - Reduces cost and improves health outcomes in this population

### **Structural challenges**

#### -Preventative Resources

- Services must be improved upstream to prevent homelessness

#### -Eligibility

- People are being turned away without a denial letter for Emergency Assistance
- They could be eligible, but are not told what they need to do
- These structural challenges put a big strain on homeless shelters

#### -Lack of Safe and Affordable Housing

- Newly developed housing is not affordable to homeless population;
  - Most are living at approx. 30% of median population;
  - At minimum wage, one must to work 80 hours/week to afford a modest, 2 bedroom apartment
- There is a lack of accessible and supportive housing
  - Evictions, criminal record and other historical factors are barriers to finding housing
  - Lack of accessibility is a barrier to individuals with physical disabilities

### **Follow up questions:**

- Has the number of homeless individuals with major mental illness diagnoses increased since Westborough State Hospital closed?
- Amaryllis Chaves from SMOC stated that although she does not have exact data, based on empirical knowledge, the numbers have raised. She also stated that mental health illness is one of the majors issues that their clients face.
- Another challenge to access to services is that it takes 6-8 week wait to see a mental health provider in the city.
- Are there long-term outcome data for individuals with major mental illness diagnoses after working with case managers at SMOC?
- Amaryllis Chaves from SMOC stated that she does not have any data points at the moment but she can get back to the commission with that data.

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## **Policy Recommendations:**

- Address Eligibility Requirements
  - Work with DHCD to ensure families are provided more guidance on necessary documentation to access emergency assistance
  - Volunteers at DTA office could be trained and walk them through it
- Address limited inventory of mobility impaired housing
- Divert families away from emergency shelters in the first place into rapid rehousing
- Look at Boston's Pilot program insuring landlords to ensure they accept a client
- Examine ways to hold landlords accountable who own multiple 3 decker houses in the city

Community members Amaryllis Chaves from SMOC and Liz Alfred of the Central Westchester Center offered insight into their experiences assisting individuals struggling with chronic homelessness, and shared thoughts on above proposals as potential solutions to begin to address these structural issues.

## **Update from Economic Development:**

Michael Traynor, Chief Development Officer for the City of Worcester was unable to attend today's meeting but sent an email that addressed the following:

1. What is the status of the update to the housing impediment study?  
→Housing Impediment study:
  - a. Road map to identify barriers to accessing safe and affordable housing
  - b. Used as a planning tool to make funding decisions
  - c. Shared as part of COW's access plan to HUD
  - d. Last released in 2012; Status update anticipated for late 2018/early 2019
2. What does Economic Development do to improve housing for the homeless  
→ The only funding that Economic Development has at its disposal is federal CDBG, ESG and HOME funds. In terms of their use to develop or rehabilitate the city's housing stock, they must be used to create housing for low – to moderate-income individuals/families.
3. SROs? To date he could not confirm the number of single room occupancies (SROs) that have been developed since the 2007 Three-Year Plan To End Homelessness In Worcester but is working to get the number and would send an update to the Commission.

## **B. Proposal for Homeless Persons' Bill of Rights**

- State-level proposal to create a bill of rights for individuals affected by homelessness.
- The bill would not cost additional money or change current policy
- Would affirm rights of homeless individuals, who often face discrimination when attempting to access public resources (e.g. Homeless individuals are treated differently accessing medical care)

## **C. Film Screening and Discussion- Uncommon Wealth: Permit to Build**

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- Dee Wells of a local worker-owned cooperative Future Focus Media presented a short film created by participants of a 6-week, summer youth program co-sponsored by the WCAC
- The film follows a young, lifelong Worcester resident through his experience with observing gentrification in Worcester, a process that is both beautifying the city and pushing residents out with new development projects and ultimately, higher housing costs
- Program participant Tyler Brown- also the film's editor- was present to answer questions, speak about the experience and share his perspective on the gentrification featured in the film.
- The film has not yet been posted on social media for the purposes of future film festival submissions, but additional screenings will be planned and announced.

**D. Confirm 2018 Commission meeting dates and times: 6-8pm**

January 8th, February 5th, March 5th, April 2nd, May 7th, June 4th, July 9th, August 6th, September 17th, October 1st, November 19th, December 3rd

**4. Old Business:**

**A. Upcoming observances:**

- International Human Rights Day – December 10th, 2017  
Vice Chairperson Berg Powers accepted a proclamation from the Mayor on 12/05/17  
Chairperson Richman will be writing some thoughts to send to Director Turcsek,
- Longest night of the year – December 21st, 5:00-7:00pm, City Hall, Levi Lincoln Chamber

Vice-Chairperson Berg Powers motioned to table items 4B. (Outreach plan for city neighborhood watch meetings) and 4C. (Review assignments for police community relations work plan).  
Commissioner Kennedy seconded

**5. Location of next meeting (January 8th, 2018): City Hall, Esther Howland Chamber**

**6. Adjournment at 8:05pm**

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