

OPINION

Four steps the new housing secretary should take

These steps would help thousands of residents secure affordable housing.

By **Steven Farrell** August 14, 2023



As Ed Augustus settles in as the secretary of the newly formed Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities, it is important to draw attention to priorities other than those that receive significant media coverage, such as housing production, the capital budget, and funding for housing line items in the annual budget.

To that end, here are some ideas for him to consider.

First, the translation of vital documents into the preferred languages of Massachusetts residents. Providing

accessible documents to the participants of EOHLC-leased housing and other programs is the law. However, in most cases, the cost to provide these accessible documents rests individually with each of the nine regional administering agencies, of which Metro Housing is one. Further, there is neither firm guidance on what is considered vital nor any mechanism to centralize the documents that have been translated. The secretary should consider directing some administrative support and funding to help resolve this significant challenge for us and our partner agencies.

Second, Massachusetts state statute identifies “source of income” as a protected class in housing programs. However, as demonstrated in both published research (such as Suffolk University’s [Qualified Renters Need Not Apply](#), July 2020) and uncountable stories from Metro Housing’s rental voucher participants, there is rampant discrimination against voucher holders that is not based on their ability to pay their rent. Given the many barriers families with low and extremely low incomes face in an obscenely tight regional rental market, the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities should increase education for voucher participants about their rights, offer trainings for realtors and property owners, and institute greater accountability across the board.

Next, a small idea that should not be a significant leap for a state already drenched in technology solutions: an online federal voucher application system. Although applicants in Metro Housing’s region can complete the Section 8 application in an online form we created, our staff must manually copy and paste the details into another system for the state-sanctioned wait list. Unbelievably, the most efficient

way to update address changes is for the applicant to contact us via the US Post Office. An online federal voucher application system would allow applicants to update and manage their information as they would for many other services. Given Metro Housing's 14-year wait list with thousands of families, that is a lot of Forever stamps.

Lastly, a half-century ago, Massachusetts had the vision and foresight to create a state rental assistance program, the first state to do so. The Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities should expand the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program to all eligible households as called for by the 2021 Senate Committee on Reimagining Massachusetts Post-Pandemic Resiliency and outlined in a report titled [A Right to Rental Assistance in Massachusetts](#) released in December 2022.

Taking these steps would help thousands of residents secure affordable housing.

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