

FAQs for Congregation's Exploring Hosting Families

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Background: Thank you for your interest in hosting families as we are organizing to respond to the new, inhumane policies put forth by Gov Healey's Administration. We know that Gov. Healy and other Massachusetts leaders could create affordable, sustainable housing with housing justice policies. The crisis we are facing is the result of decades of racist housing policy that has not centered affordable housing or keeping people in their homes. When a majority of people in Massachusetts struggle to find and sustain housing, all of us suffer. Migration is a fact of life and we want to welcome new arrivals to Massachusetts, not drive them out with shelter policies that hurt everyone.

Who we are and what we can offer: This document is compiled by several groups who are supporting congregations feeling called to support families and children in this moment. These include but are not limited to UU Mass Action, BIJAN, and Episcopal City Mission. While we can't recreate a 40 year old shelter system, we are morally called to directly support families in this moment. There is no existing program, no clear answers, no one right way to host. We do not have all the answers.

This guide is intended to provide an overview to support your congregation in having your own conversations about how you can show up in this moment, and to empower congregations to identify your own answers to the many questions that arise while exploring hosting with the support and knowledge gained from our broader network.

Scope of need: Right now, each night families are sleeping in alleys, in train stations, or other places outside. You may be asking yourself if what you can offer is enough - if you can only host one family, if you can only host for a week, if you can only host overnight but not during the daytime - is that useful? The answer is that right now providing whatever offering you can will give organizers, working to connect families with safer places to sleep, a valuable resource. We encourage you to consider what it is you can reasonably offer, even if it seems insufficient, so folks on the ground can direct people to safer spaces as needed given whatever boundaries you set.

As of late September, based on the needs on the ground, there are two main types of need in congregational hosting.

- **Short-term nightly rapid response:** This type of hosting need will be with short notice (possibly with 2 hours notice), and can occur when a Welcome Center closes and the line was too long for some people to be processed that day. These folks need temporary housing that night so they can go back to the Family Welcome Center and complete processing the following day. Sometimes it takes a few days until they know if they can qualify for shelter from the state. After reviewing their options, there may be a few days where they need a place to stay as they decide what they want to do next. We anticipate this need being anytime from one night to a week.
- **Longer-term hosting:** Examples of this type of hosting could be for a family who has chosen not to take the five days of respite so they can remain on the shelter waitlist, or who took their respite stay and afterwards have to wait indefinitely to get into shelter. Each family and case would require a different length of stay, likely several months or longer.

Approach to hosting: We are having these conversations because of our shared values of offering housing, in knowing and affirming that everyone deserves to sleep with a roof over their head, a place they can call home and feel safe. In engaging in conversation about how your congregation can show up in this moment around Emergency Shelter, we also see this as an opportunity to build our collective muscles in how we can show up for each other, whether specifically those impacted by new cruel shelter laws, or otherwise. We encourage anyone considering hosting to approach these efforts with a sense of flexibility. Nothing is static in this work; the reality on the ground, what the needs are, who is being targeted or impacted, the policies, are constantly in flux. The need right now for hosts for families who are not able to get into Emergency Shelter is dire. And, these needs will change both for these families, and for those in other situations who are unable to access safe places to stay. In having conversations in your congregation, in voting to host people in this moment, we encourage you to think broadly about what you are able to affirm so that as needs shift, you are set up to be adaptable in your congregation's response.

We also invite you to think about hosting as an opportunity to be creative with your congregation and resources. We will share some needs below, and BIJAN and others may be able to support your congregation in meeting those needs. We know that when there is a family in congregations right here, right now, we have faith that people will show up for them and that your community has an abundance of resources to offer.

In working with families, we ask that you follow their lead about what they need, and work to support them in having as much autonomy as possible. Be in conversation about what they actually need in terms of support, food, logistics, etc. and try to respect and work towards that as much as possible.

FAQs:

What is needed to offer hosting?

We are all working on these issues as they emerge and we are not a formal organization. These are our observations and suggestions, not actual requirements.

We had before shared that outdoors in tents was valuable, but as the weather is changing we are looking primarily for indoor offerings.

There are many ways to creatively meet these needs. We will give examples but you know your community and resources best and we encourage you to think expansively! More examples about how to approach these needs later in the document.

For Short term hosting:

- Space for at least one entire family to sleep indoors in a rec center, classroom, sanctuary, etc.
- If you can host at night but they need to leave during the day, that is still a valuable offering in some cases because often those needing short term hosts will be going back to the Welcome Centers
- Access to a bathroom
- Access to drinking water
- Bedding: Resources to support guests in being as comfortable as possible: can you get air mattresses, cots, sleeping bags, blankets?
- Food: Likely families staying short term will be getting two meals at the Welcome Center during the days, but we encourage someone to be point on providing food as needed. (take out pizza, congregants bringing meals as needed, taking families grocery shopping, etc)
- Transport plan: These families will need to get to one of the Welcome Centers in the mornings. Who can support with transportation, whether dropping off directly at welcome centers or at a pick up spot, or supporting folks in taking the train? Who can resource borrowing car seats as needed if you are transporting young children? Who can fundraise to fund an uber if no one can drive directly?
- Clothing: If needed, try to get items donated that the families need like seasonally appropriate clothes, etc.
- Laundry/showers: ideally there is a way you can offer families a place to do laundry and shower. This could be in your congregation, in a congregants home, a community center, another church. Get creative!
- A point person for the space who can be in contact and answer questions about space usage for the families, and in case of an emergency.

- Ability to creatively communicate: While it's ideal that folks can communicate in the same language, that's not a requirement. We do ask that a minimum people in the congregation are able to use apps like google translate with the option to speak to translate, as a resource for communicating with families.

For Long term hosting:

Nearly all the needs for short term apply to long term hosting, though long term will likely not need to get to the Welcome Center each day. Additionally, for longer term hosting things like laundry, showers, food, etc. will need a more sustainable long term plan. ' For long term stays, we additionally ask that you have a point person for medical support - someone who can direct people to how to get to urgent care, nearest hospital, and support ordering rides or arranging transport as needed. It can also be helpful to have volunteers who can help them look for longer term housing or jobs, and vouch for them to support them in attaining those goals as opportunities arise. Directing or helping to get school age children registered for school is another important task that a congregant can help with.

For longer term hosting, it's important also to have a plan for where they can be during each day if you are not able to open your congregation during the days.

How do I meet these needs?

We encourage you to be creative about how you can meet the needs of your guests. Here are some examples:

Food: Can guests use your kitchen, with someone to support them in grocery shopping? Can you have a rotation of congregants bringing meals over? Can guests use someone's kitchen in their home, or on a rotation? Guests will likely all have SNAP benefits, but can you fundraise to support supplementing those benefits as needed? Is there a food pantry? For the short term, BIJAN or others might be able to support funds for take out for a night or two.

Laundry, showers: Can someone open their home during the day on occasion during the week? Is there a community center that they can use, or other community resources? Do you have laundry and showers in your own congregation?

Stuff: Can you host a drive from your congregation, neighborhood congregations, etc to find things that are needed? Or fundraise so guests can buy their own items? BIJAN also has many donated items and whatsapp and email groups that we can add you to in order to request donations as needed.

During the day: If you can't host folks during the day, think about what public spaces exist in your community? Libraries, community centers, Day centers, etc. Are you near public transit that could transport people to a place during the day if your community doesn't have it? Additionally, some parents are already working and have their own appointments and friendships. They may or may not need support to figure out what to do during the day.

Transportation: Are there people who can drive folks around? Fundraise to coordinate Ubers and Lyfts? Is there public transportation you can support families in using? BIJAN also has networks to coordinate drivers occasionally, but we encourage you to set up your own local network and resources.

What about insurance?

There is no one right way to approach this question, it is up to each congregation to decide for themselves what makes the most sense. Some possibilities include:

- You can go through your insurance to make sure you have coverage, which may require permission from the city. Many churches are working with their cities and towns to get permits or permission.
- Regardless of if you formally go through your insurance, we recommend getting in touch with your City/Town officials about your plans.
- You may decide that the need is urgent and go ahead, and can address issues as they arise, which is how some congregations have approached this.

My congregation has a “safe church” policy that requires two adults who are trained and certified to be supervising when there are children and other vulnerable people. How does that apply to sheltering?

These are valid concerns, but in the case of families sheltering at the church, it is appropriate to rely on the parents for the supervision and safety of their children.

Please make sure that parents know they are responsible for keeping an eye on their children at all times while there.

What are the goals of hosting? What if we immediately get shut down?

One main goal of hosting is to provide families with safer alternatives to sleeping on the street. However, there are many benefits to hosting in addition to this most direct impact.

- To provide roof over the heads of children for any amount of time
- To live out our moral values
- To practice solidarity, share resources, and show up as human in a situation where many are being treated inhumanely
- To engage more people in your congregation and town in efforts to address this crisis so we are building the movement for the long term
- To show our leaders both how communities are showing up and affirming humanity in this moment, and also the limitations of individuals and congregations and the need for systemic approach to sheltering families
- To invite the question, whether or not you are able to host in the end, of “ what can we do in this moment” of which there are endless possibilities and needs

What other congregations have hosted?

This is a decentralized effort, and in order to protect the families’ privacy, there is no one list of all the congregations who have been showing up at this moment. But we know that congregations across the state are opening their doors in whatever ways they can to house families in this moment of crisis.

Congregations in [Natick](#), Quincy, and [East Boston](#) are the most public congregations who have hosted, and as we learn more from other congregations who host we will update this document with wisdom gained. Coming soon is also a monthly space to share learnings and resources with each other.

What do I do when I am ready to host?

Please email elizabeth.b.nguyen@gmail.com if you are ready to host and we will share that with people who are connecting families with shelter space.

If you are not ready to host but are close and have a few questions, you can reach out to hannah@ecmteam.us, tsmookler@uumassaction.org or jmurphy@uumassaction.org.

Even if you are still in conversation, please [fill in this form](#) to keep us updated on the landscape of conversations happening at congregations, and to better support and network between congregations exploring hosting.

Other Factors to Consider

- Distance from Family Welcome Centers (Quincy and Allston), or accessibility to public transit.
- How much space? How many people/families could the space hold? Indoors families don't need separate private rooms, just adequate space.
- Is the location close to direct service support like food pantry, medical facility/urgent care, day center, etc.?
- Makeup of your community - is there a population that shares the culture and speaks the language? If not, in what ways can they be connected nearby?
- What is the political context of your town? - if racism and hostility is very high this might be a reason to not host. The safety of the families is a primary concern.

List of resources:

- For congregations or host homes thinking about housing just 1-2 families, we encourage you to sign up through the program hosted by the Brazilian Workers Center. See this [FAQ prepared by the Brazilian Workers Center](#) that may answer some questions and if you have individuals who would like to host, have them fill out this form <https://bit.ly/HostHomesMA>.
- [Crowd-Sourced Resource List for Congregations Hosting Families](#)
- [Here](#) are some questions to think about as you see what is possible in your congregations (from summer, might be outdated)
- [Here is a recording](#) (Passcode: Pw?dH69i) from our first session about thinking about goals, models, challenges, and opportunities for hosting folks.

- [CAPAS](#) (Community Accompaniment Program with Asylum Seekers) A UU Program that has guidelines on hosting for their program that may feel relevant right now
- We are working to create a monthly support space for congregations who are considering or are already hosting. Sign up on the interest form to stay tuned!
- Reach out to Pastor Nikira who has hosted at at 617-903-0120
- East Boston Contact: oursaviourseastboston@gmail.com, (617) 569-6236

Sample conversation guide for planning to host:

Ideally you are able to answer these questions as you get ready to host!

- Start by affirming why you feel called to explore hosting a family. Ground in this and revisit if/when conversations get challenging.
- Where in your congregation are you planning to host folks? How many people/families can you offer space to?
- Discuss what resources exist in your community.
 - What community spaces, social services, grocery stores, etc exist in your town?
 - What resources might people in your congregation have to offer?
 - What other community groups might be able to support if needed?
- Point people to identify (can be the same person or a committee; see above for ways these needs can be met. Will look different for short and long term guests)
 - Point of contact for medical emergencies
 - Point food coordinator
 - Point material needs coordinator (blankets, places to sleep, clothes)
 - Point transportation coordinator
 - Point of contact for the building

Email tsmookler@uumassaction.org if you would like to plug in!