Residential Assistance for Families in Transition in Worcester County

Worcester County, located in the heart of the commonwealth, features a varied landscape and distinct population, and has the largest landmass of any county in the state. Helping the residents of this culturally and economically diverse area with their housing needs is RCAP Solutions. It serves as a Section 8 administrator and as Housing Consumer Education Center, providing rental assistance, homebuyer and housing counseling, information and referrals to about 6,200 households each year.

As some of these households struggle to keep up with their bills, they teeter on the edge of homelessness. That is where the Residential Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) program comes in. RAFT is the state’s largest family homelessness prevention program.

REAL SAVINGS

By investing $800,707 in RCAP’s 2016 RAFT program, the commonwealth saved $10.3 million and kept 300 families out of emergency shelter.

Note: Calculation compares the cost to assist RCAP’s FY 2016 RAFT families to the estimated cost to house the same number of families in emergency shelter (an average stay of 10.5-months costing $36,855 per family, according to state data).

Worcester County family poverty rate: 8.4 percent
City of Worcester family poverty rate of 17.4 percent
Renter population in county: 34.8 percent
Renter population in city: 56 percent
Vacant rental units in county: 6.6 percent
Vacant rental units in city: 6.3 percent
Median rent for two-bedroom apartment: $1,062
Annual income needed to afford two-bedroom apartment: $42,480
County residents who can’t afford that: about 34.3 percent
City residents who can’t afford that: about 48 percent

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates; National Low Income Housing Coalition; images from Wikimedia Commons
“I had a nervous breakdown about a year ago. I spent 10 days in the hospital. My family and I were not together. … My daughter’s father was murdered in Guatemala three months ago. My life was collapsing slowly I had no hope. Coming to RCAP Solutions gave me hope. … Thanks to the RAFT program my family is complete, and we were given a second chance of being happy, reunited.”

– Tracy, RCAP RAFT client

This report paints a picture of RCAP’s RAFT profile and the greatest needs of clients during fiscal 2015 and 2016. The RAFT program serves families who have very low and extremely low incomes. After determining eligibility, families may receive up to $4,000 annually to help them with rental arrearages, utility bills, moving costs and other key housing expenses. RCAP is one of two state-contracted administrators for RAFT in the area.

TOTAL RAFT FUNDING AND CLIENTS SERVED

RCAP’s RAFT funding increased by 29 percent for 15 percent more clients in need. Their average benefit increased 21 percent. RCAP served 7 percent of all RAFT clients statewide.

2016 funding: $800,707
2016 RAFT clients: 300
2015 funding: $578,036
2015 RAFT clients: 262
2016 avg. benefit: $2,669
2015 avg. benefit: $2,206

REPEAT CLIENTS IN FY 2016

In FY 2016 clients, there were 300 clients, 2 of whom had received RAFT aid in FY 2015. These returning clients cost less on average than their all-client peers ($2,505 versus $3,104). With less than 1 percent of 2016 RAFT clients having received aid the year prior, the program is not being overused. RAFT is being used as it should: to pull Worcester County families back from the brink of homelessness.

FY 2015 AND FY 2016 PAYMENTS

Arrears as a share of total payments declined from 47 percent of all payments in FY 2015 to 39 percent of all payments in FY 2016; actual spending on arrears rose, however, from $273,538 to $313,864, a 15 percent increase.

Note: Some categories not listed for lack of spending.

RAFT CONTACT

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THE MAJORITY OF RAFT CLIENTS: WOMEN AND CHILDREN

As with all RAFT programs around the state, RCAP’s RAFT client households are predominantly managed by women, at 88 percent in 2016. More often than not, this were single mothers and two children. In FY 2015, there were 200 women and 25 men (and 37 not identified); in FY 2016, there were 228 women and 28 men (44 not identified). In FY 2015, the average age of RCAP’s clients was 37, and in FY 2016 it was 35.

FY 2015 AND FY 2016 ASSISTANCE BY CITY AND TOWN

WORCESTER
2015 clients: 121
2015 RAFT aid: $295,872
Percent of aid in 2015: 52%
2016 clients: 161
2016 aid: $295,872
Percent of aid in 2016: 65%

WEBSTER
2015 clients: 10
2015 RAFT aid: $22,198
Percent of aid in 2015: 4%
2016 clients: 10
2016 aid: $22,198
Percent of aid in 2016: 4%

SOUTHBRIDGE
2015 clients: 20
2015 RAFT aid: $63,661
Percent of aid in 2015: 11%
2016 clients: 13
2016 aid: $50,026
Percent of aid in 2016: 6%

FITCHBURG
2015 clients: 18
2015 RAFT aid: $51,054
Percent of aid in 2015: 9%
2016 clients: 29
2016 aid: $76,390
Percent of aid in 2016: 10%

LEOMINSTER
2015 clients: 11
2015 RAFT aid: $22,198
Percent of aid in 2015: 4%
2016 clients: 5
2016 aid: $33,701
Percent of aid in 2016: 4%

OTHER TOWNS: In FY 2015, 44 clients from 25 smaller area communities received $115,487 in RAFT aid, comprising 20 percent of RCAP’s annual RAFT funding. In FY 2016, 35 clients, again in 25 smaller Worcester County towns, needed $86,664 in aid, making up 11 percent of RCAP’s funding for the year.

OVERALL: Worcester absorbed more than half of all area RAFT funding because of demand in FY 2015 ($295,872, or 52 percent) and FY 2016 ($503,928, or 65 percent); year over year, it meant a 70 percent increase in payments. The next closest towns with demand were Southbridge and Fitchburg, which each only used about 10 percent of total RCAP RAFT funding.

Note: Dollars are rounded up to nearest dollar.
Not less than 50 percent of the funding will be available for families with an income at or below 30 percent of AMI, and a maximum of 50 percent for families between 30-50 percent AMI, in accordance with the state budget. In Worcester County, three-member families with incomes below $37,450 would be eligible for RAFT aid.

Percentages are based on clients’ declared race and ethnicity.

Eviction and being asked to leave made up three-quarters of all housing crises in the area in 2015 and 2016. Domestic violence as a cause of housing crises increased in FY 2016, from 7 cases in FY 2015 to 13 the following year.

The Worcester area has whites being the main users of RAFT aid, but saw an increase of African American clients from FY 2015 to FY 2016, by some 163 percent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>71%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not Given</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTES

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2Percentages are based on clients’ declared race and ethnicity.

CREDITS

This report was written and compiled by Noah Hoffenberg, director of Housing Assistance Corporation’s Housing Information Department, for the Regional Housing Network of Massachusetts and RCAP. It was designed with the help of Kristen vonHentschel.