

Massachusetts Advocacy Groups Release Results of Think Tank on Autism and Housing

A coalition of advocacy groups released a white paper summarizing the outcomes of a think tank held last September on housing challenges facing the Massachusetts autism community. The think tank brainstormed housing options appropriate to the range of housing needs in the autism community, identifying models that might be built with public funds, private funds, or through public/private partnerships. The report, which was submitted to the Massachusetts Autism Commission and to the housing committee of the Commission, contained a series of recommendations to Massachusetts state agencies – including the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), the Department of Developmental Services (DDS), the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), MassHousing, and MassHealth – and to the Autism Commission itself.

The think tank was organized by Autism Housing Pathways (AHP), Advocates for Autism of Massachusetts (AFAM), and The Arc of Massachusetts, with additional support from the Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council and major human services providers, Advocates and HMEA. Participants included more than 50 autistic individuals, family members, service providers, officials from state human services and housing agencies, finance professionals, developers, and designers.

Thirteen recommendations were made, including:

- DDS and DESE partner with the state university system on an expanded transitional housing program for college-aged youth with autism;
- DDS and DHCD should look at developing inclusive small-footprint housing options such as micro-units and single room occupancy units that feature autism-friendly design and the use of assistive technology to increase independent living skills;
- DDS should explore ways to increase residents' choice, control, and privacy in its community residences (group homes) through options such as innovative ownership models and modified designs;
- Autism-friendly design should be incorporated into a percentage of new construction funded by DHCD and MassHousing; and
- The transition process for autistic youths leaving school should be beefed up to include completing housing applications, working on improving independent living skills, and training for students and their families on housing options.

In general, there was an emphasis on using architectural design, assistive technology, and self-direction to improve outcomes.

The think tank took place against a backdrop of a surge in those identified with autism reaching adulthood. Autism Housing Pathways estimates that by 2025 the number of 18-37 year olds with autism in Massachusetts may be about 17,428, about 85% of whom would likely need affordable, supported housing, but would not be eligible for housing from DDS under its current guidelines.

The Autism Commission has been tasked by the legislature with studying the housing needs of the Massachusetts autism community, and making recommendations.

The complete white paper is available at <http://mahousingthinktank.org/>

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