

## The Waiting Game for Housing

Access to housing choice has never been more limited than in 2024. Housing instability and risk of falling into homelessness is ever present as families spend a higher percentage of income on housing expenses. In 2022, our local homeless response system reported [3,914 individuals](#) experiencing homelessness for the very first time. The average cost for a 1-bedroom apartment in Amesbury, Salisbury and Newburyport is now over \$2,000 per month with vacancy rates ranging from 3% in Newburyport to 1% in Amesbury. In a healthy housing market, roughly 5.5 to 6% of rental units should be available at any given moment.

Massachusetts is fortunate to be among the small group of states with a more robust policy approach to housing and family shelter but waiting lists for these resources are still incredibly long and there is no guarantee of permanent housing. In fact, the family shelter system has become so overwhelmed it is now capped at 7,500 families due to capacity constraints. As of this month there were 783 families waiting across the commonwealth just for shelter placement. The current average stay in shelter is 13 to 14 months but a new bill in the state house would limit this to 9 months with no clear plan to prevent families from sliding back into homelessness once they hit their stay limit.

Public Housing is one of the primary resources for low-income households with Amesbury, Merrimac, Newburyport, Salisbury and West Newbury all participating in the centralized application system CHAMP. However, as of this month there are 180,000 people in the system waiting for public housing units or vouchers. Having a centralized system is an excellent approach to reducing application barriers but does nothing to relieve the housing stock shortage that is driving much of the affordability crisis. According to the national low-income housing coalition, [Massachusetts has a deficit of nearly 375,000 affordable units](#) for households at or below 50% of the area median income. For our area, a family of four earning [\\$74,200 annually](#) is eligible for housing assistance programs because of sky high cost of living. This creates a reverberative impact beyond the household itself, with businesses struggling to attract and retain workforce due to lack of housing choice. This is particularly evident in healthcare, leading to shortages for primary care and other services.

So how do we fix this? How can we make housing more accessible for our kids, neighbors, friends and community at large? It starts with recognizing that the solution is in our own hands. We simply cannot meet growing needs while standing in opposition to new housing creation. Housing choice means a robust housing market accessible for all income levels including seniors on fixed income, working households and the most vulnerable among us. Housing choice is not something to fear, but an essential component to a thriving and economically healthy community. As people continue to wait for housing support in our beleaguered system, we do not have to wait as a community to deliver solutions.

My name is Jamie Blackburn and I am a resident of Amesbury, mother to an AMS Student and a housing choice advocate.

Please join us for the April 18th meeting of the Housing Choice Coalition at the Newbury Town Library at 6PM or by zoom, which will focus on the MBTA Communities Law. Registration for that meeting can be found here: <https://bit.ly/4bdPiii> .

For more information about the Greater Newburyport Housing Choice Coalition, go to <https://bit.ly/3HHVotS> or contact Jackie Meers at [jmeers@ywcanewburyport.org](mailto:jmeers@ywcanewburyport.org).