

Housing Choices

A Newsletter for Mental Health Professionals

July 2006

Sponsored by the Pennsylvania Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

Pennsylvania a Leader in Housing and Recovery-Oriented Services

By Peggy Robertson

Pennsylvania is a national leader in providing training and technical assistance to promote housing and recovery-oriented services for people with serious mental illness and co-occurring disorders. Because the provision of housing and supports for people with mental illness has become a top priority in the Commonwealth, the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS) supports a number of initiatives that serve as models for the rest of the country.

LHOTS Cited as Best Practice in Pennsylvania

One of the most exemplary innovations of the OMHSAS-sponsored activities is the formation of Local Housing Option Teams, better known as LHOTs (pronounced L-HOTs). LHOTs, which are considered a *best practice* in Pennsylvania, bring together the key stakeholders at the county or regional level to identify the housing needs of people with disabilities and to develop action plans and long-term solutions to meet those needs. LHOTs are most successful when they include local leadership, a dedication of time on the part of the participating representatives, and a commitment to the process. It is critical that LHOTs include representatives from a variety of agencies. Because local housing authorities have direct access to many federal

and state housing resources, it is imperative that they are active LHOT participants. The more people at the LHOT table, the more opportunities there are for coordination and to learn about available resources and additional funding streams.

Evolution of an LHOT

Each LHOT is unique and the specific mission, goal and priorities reflect the county or counties involved. The composition of the LHOT can vary, depending on which agencies are essential to address the specific needs identified. Lisa Yaffe, Deputy Executive Director, Governor's Office of Housing and Community Revitalization, noted, "LHOTS make the conversation easier between different community agencies. It is interesting that the LHOT experience from county to county is very different."

There are currently 23 LHOTs that serve 36 of the 67 counties in Pennsylvania. Their combined accomplishments are impressive: through LHOT efforts a total of 1,136 households with individuals with serious mental illness have been assisted. Joan Erney, Deputy Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW) Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS), commends the work being done by LHOTs. "This is one of the most effective ways in which housing solutions can be developed at the local level. LHOTs generate resources in order to integrate people into the community with needed supports."

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LHOTs evolved from plans that began over fifteen years ago in Pennsylvania to address the housing needs of mental health consumers. At that time, OMHSAS asked each county to designate a Mental Health Housing Specialist to provide housing assistance. The state recognized that most housing specialists had other responsibilities besides housing and therefore, OMHSAS made a commitment to provide housing specialists with the opportunity for professional development in a variety of ways. Because of this assistance, Mental Health offices are actively involved in developing housing and increasing housing options for people with serious mental illness and co-occurring disorders.

State Supported Initiatives

In 1996, OMHSAS hired Diana T. Myers and Associates, Inc. (DMA), a housing and community development consulting firm, to serve as the housing technical assistance provider addressing statewide issues through the development and conduct of conferences, workshops, meetings and the provision of direct technical assistance (TA). For over a decade, DMA working with OMHSAS staff, has provided:

- Quarterly meetings for Mental Health Housing Specialists which address a variety of timely topics

including housing for youth aging out of foster care, elderly individuals with mental illness and people with mental illness involved in the criminal justice system

- Statewide conferences, workshops and training on housing
- Quarterly newsletters on various topics including funding sources, fair housing, government programs, home-ownership, housing options, healthcare and homelessness
- Publications including: “Digest of Model Programs for the Homeless: Rural Outreach and Engagement and Housing First”, “Hammering Out Housing Solutions: A Digest of Pennsylvania Initiatives” and “Compendium of Housing Programs In Pennsylvania: A Resource for Expanding Affordable Accessible Housing for People with Disabilities”
- The website, www.pahousingchoices.org
- Information on funding opportunities, changes in legislation, national and state policy updates, and other materials of relevance to housing for people with mental illness and co-occurring disorders through a web-based Clearinghouse
- Direct technical assistance on housing

Importance of Technical Assistance

In the early years, the provision of technical assistance had considerable impact on the counties, so in 2001 OMHSAS decided to shift their efforts and increase direct technical assistance to counties instead of conducting an annual housing conference. The initial goal was to encourage all counties to engage in housing efforts and to increase the number of affordable housing opportunities for people with serious mental illness and co-occurring disorders.

As a first step, OMHSAS issued a call to counties offering free TA in housing needs assessment, strategies, housing project planning and proposal writing with the contingency that counties make a commitment of staff time and leadership. Thirteen counties submitted letters of interest and initial meetings were held with twelve of those counties. Each county was required to set up a working group of local agencies engaged in housing or MH services such as emergency shelter, case management and community education.

The first year of TA started with the premise that each county be provided with training on how to conduct a housing needs assessment to identify priorities and target populations. Although several counties did conduct excellent

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needs assessments, it was apparent that because the housing needs were immediate and critical, people attending needed quick results in order to stay engaged. In addition, several counties were unable to make a commitment of time because they lacked the capacity and staff for housing.

The counties that were able to bring together the key stakeholders in the community and establish priorities for action became the first official LHOTs. Initially most LHOTs were facilitated by the county department of mental health/mental retardation. Any local agency that was willing to dedicate time and administrative support to the LHOT moved into the role of facilitator. In many of the LHOTs these positions were assumed by the county MH housing specialist.

During the second year, the consultants worked intensively with the most promising LHOTs and made sure to identify projects that would have quick concrete results. The consultants offered TA in a variety of areas which included: start-up; assistance with mission and role; needs assessment; strategic planning and facilitation of meetings; identification of priorities; and decisions on which projects to pursue. Most LHOTs found that in order to increase communication, it was

necessary for the early meetings to be educational, where everyone shared information about their agency and learned each others' language. During the next two years (by early 2004), four of the initial LHOTs that were formed used their technical assistance to develop projects that were very successful. Their activities described below have served as models for other LHOTs.

Initial LHOT Activities

- The Dauphin County LHOT conducted a housing needs assessment and identified housing needs for consumers with disabilities, setting a goal of creating 100 new housing opportunities; they exceeded this goal by procuring 45 housing choice vouchers in the City of Harrisburg and 70 vouchers in Dauphin County, as well as in-home and community-based supportive services for 20 individuals. Dauphin County also became the first LHOT to hire a fulltime, paid coordinator.
- The Delaware County LHOT entered into a Memo of Understanding between eleven agencies including the Delaware County Housing Authority, which set-aside Housing

Choice Vouchers for people with disabilities. 23 people were awarded vouchers and each household received case management services from referring agencies.

- The Montgomery County PHOT (Permanent Housing Options Team) identified three populations they wanted to serve: persons with mental illness ready to move out of CRRs, adults with mental retardation with aging parents, and youth aging out of the Foster Care System. The PHOT offered workshops for youth, training for service providers, and expanded their housing options to include homeownership, tenant-based rental assistance that provides aftercare for youth, and scattered site rental housing with supportive services.
- The Northwestern Consortium (Clearfield, Jefferson, Cameron, Elk McKean, Forest, Warren and Potter Counties) developed plans to build and maintain an eight-unit apartment building of modular construction to provide permanent housing to single adults with a mental health diagnosis. They also received four Shelter Plus Care grants and 57 vouchers for 51 one-bedroom units and six two-bedroom units.

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LHOT Accomplishments

It was clear that the key to these early LHOT successes was collaboration. Since that time, the concept of the LHOT has grown dramatically. A survey conducted in March 2006 identified 23 LHOTs operating in 36 counties throughout Pennsylvania in rural, suburban and urban areas. The following are some of the highlights of the LHOT accomplishments, based on survey responses from 22 of the LHOTs.

- 50% of the LHOTs have conducted needs assessments.
- A total of 1,136 households with serious mental illness are being assisted through LHOT efforts, 35% of whom are homeless persons with serious mental illness and/

or co-occurring disorders.

- The provision of housing options for people with disabilities has yielded housing authority preferences of 200 units, set-asides of 350 units, and 70 Section 8 Mainstream vouchers.
- Supportive Housing Program projects are serving 205 homeless individuals with serious mental illness and Shelter Plus Care projects are serving 188 homeless households.
- New housing production through Section 811 projects created a total of 53 units, and new housing opportunities were created for an additional 70 households including five emergency shelter beds, two Fairweather Lodges serving eight persons, 43

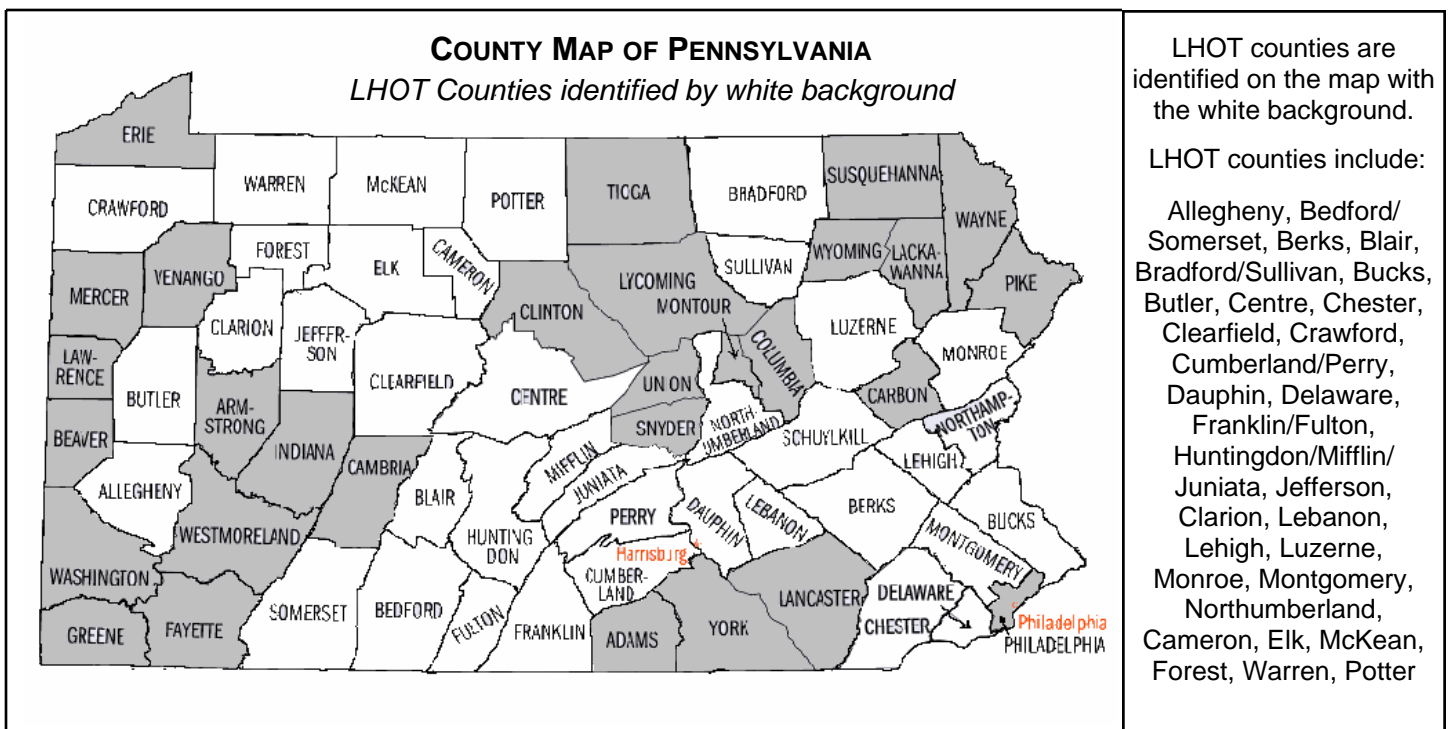
affordable housing units, twelve beds for homeless youth or those aging out of the foster care system, and homeownership for two households.

- Other accomplishments include community education and awareness efforts, strategic planning and increased communication with private landlords.

Future LHOT Activities

LHOTs play an important role in expanding housing and their effectiveness is proven by their achievements. The provision of technical assistance has been critical in helping LHOTs become successful and empowered. Most important, the consultants have served as “cross-fertilization agents”, spreading ideas and

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successes from one LHOT to another. Based on the results of the surveys, the LHOTs want to continue their role well into the future and have requested additional technical assistance for the following activities:

- Expanding and maintaining LHOT membership
- Identification of LHOT goals, objectives and priorities and strategic planning
- Strategies to combat NIMBYism
- Assistance with expanding emergency shelter beds
- Identification of matching funds for McKinney and other projects, especially for supportive services
- Assistance with specific development projects including Section 811

Other Innovative Housing Options

In addition to LHOTs, OMHSAS supports other creative housing options that promote housing and recovery-oriented services for people with mental illness and co-occurring disorders. Shared housing, a living arrangement where two or more unrelated people share a home or apartment to their mutual advantage, has met with success in Pennsylvania. Two characteristics distinguish shared housing: 1) members of shared housing choose the other members of the

household and 2) members of a shared residence have control over policy decision making and management of the day-to-day operations of their home. The following are two effective examples of shared housing.

- The Fairweather Lodge is a shared housing model that incorporates employment to enhance the lives of adults with a mental health disability. The Lodge Program helps people reintegrate themselves into the community. Its goal is to provide emotional support, a place to live, and employment for its members. The program was developed by Dr. George Fairweather in California in 1963. Dr. Fairweather found that people with serious mental illness are less likely to return to the hospital when they live and work together as a group. The Lodge Program helps people stay in the community longer, provides more employment opportunities, and costs less than conventional treatment programs. Stairways Behavioral Health, Inc. located in Erie implemented the first Fairweather Lodge in Pennsylvania in 2001. Stairways, with support from OMHSAS, has

provided technical assistance to other counties interested in starting lodges. There are currently ten Fairweather Lodges operating in Pennsylvania and ten under development.

- Non-profit Cooperatives provide affordable housing with maximum community control. The co-op resident becomes not only a co-owner of the cooperative but also a vital member of the community. This approach provides housing choices that balance the individual's support needs with his or her desire to live within a broader community. 626 Co-op in Montgomery County is the first recovery-oriented co-operative living arrangement for people with disabilities in Pennsylvania that operates as a non-profit. The residents own a share of the co-op, which, along with the recovery-oriented services, have given them increased control over their lives.

Commitment to Continued Housing and Recovery-Oriented Services

Another way in which consumers can gain control over their lives is by learning how to become effective advocates. In January 2006, consumer trainings were prepared and presented by DMA to 49 participants representing nineteen

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counties/joinders throughout Pennsylvania. Consumers learned about the full range of affordable housing options and resources, and how to advocate for expanded housing options in their community. Mental Health Housing Specialists also participated in the trainings, having an opportunity to work with consumers to promote various housing options.

Pennsylvania has made a huge commitment to promoting various housing options and a recent exciting endeavor under the directive of the OMHSAS Adult Committee is the Housing Work Group. This is a true collaborative effort among all key stakeholders in the state and includes experts in the field who are meeting on a regular basis to pull together existing resources that will address housing and supports issues. The group includes representatives from three OMHSAS committees, the Governor's Office of Housing and Community Revitalization, The Governor's Office of Health Care Reform, the Department of Community and Economic Development, the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency, three County Mental Health Offices, three Provider Agencies, and At-Large participants and consumers.

The Work Group is developing short and long term goals for persons to be housed. It will also identify specific housing



Joan Erney, Deputy Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

models and the enriched services necessary to support the housing choices made by consumers. The goal is to create a system that more closely reflects the current research on housing that supports recovery for individuals using the mental health system.

It is also important to note that Ms. Erney recently agreed to chair the Housing Work Group Committee of the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors, which is giving her access to other model housing solutions being practiced throughout the country.

Another state-sponsored activity is the compilation of a publication entitled "Hammering Out Housing Solutions II: Supporting Housing and Recovery-Oriented Services". This publication will support the

recommendations of the Housing Work Group and will include descriptions of recovery-oriented services and case studies of several counties in Pennsylvania that have designed services to support a full range of community-based housing options.

Pennsylvania's Leadership Role

Through statewide support and the commitment of OMHSAS, effective stakeholder groups have been created that are making a difference in meeting the housing needs of people with mental illness in Pennsylvania. Diana Myers is excited about the leadership role Pennsylvania has taken to promote expanded housing options with recovery-oriented supports. "The state has recognized that there is a need not just to reorganize resources but also to rethink

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LHOTs Speak Out

By Peggy Robertson

Each LHOT is unique. However, there is a common thread among those LHOTs that have met with success – a commitment of leadership and the formation of partnerships with the participation of key provider and housing agencies. Those people who have dedicated their time to coordinating LHOT efforts would agree that they have been able to accomplish much more through collaboration. Four LHOT Coordinators from different regions of the state share their experiences and the positive impact the LHOT has had on their community.

Franklin/Fulton Counties

Ms. Kimberly Lucas, Coordinator of the Franklin/Fulton LHOT and Director of the Cross-Systems Department of Franklin County Human Services, is the driving force behind their LHOT. She shared her views about the positive impact the LHOT has had on the community. “We have some really energetic people involved in the LHOT. Some participants come and go, but we have a strong core group of folks that are very consistent. Because of the LHOT, the community knows what we are doing and believes in what we are doing. People now have a greater understanding of homelessness and the need for safe and affordable housing.”

Ms. Lucas also recognizes that each LHOT in Pennsylvania has a different focus. “Learning about and being involved in the Franklin/Fulton LHOT has proven to me that every LHOT is different. I think what makes the Franklin/Fulton LHOT unique is our commitment to create solutions for the homeless and near homeless with conditions that are affordable, compassionate, safe and that respect the diverse needs and cultures within the community.”

Lebanon County

The Lebanon County LHOT, under the guidance of David Hartman, Housing Specialist for the Lebanon County Mental Health/Mental Retardation (MH/MR) Program since August 2003, finds that the smaller size of their county has been an advantage. Mr. Hartman explained, “Because Lebanon County is smaller, it is easier for us to work together. The LHOT meets monthly and we generally have good attendance. We are also part of the Central Harrisburg Regional Homeless Advisory Board, which gives us the opportunity to be part of a much larger Continuum of Care. We have benefited greatly from the technical assistance we have received. This has been instrumental in coordinating county agencies

to identify necessary housing and resource needs to create or expand accessible, affordable and safe housing opportunities for persons with disabilities in Lebanon County.”

Delaware County

Initial technical assistance for the Delaware County LHOT provided participating agencies with an educational process to understand the need for more housing opportunities and to become more knowledgeable about housing and services. Tracy Beck, Executive Director of Residential Living Options (RLO) and facilitator of the Delaware County LHOT stated, “Our LHOT consists of a wonderful group of people who are genuinely engaged. We have built a significant partnership that has created a broad pool of resources that has provided supports and has increased a person’s success for full inclusion and participation in community life. The LHOT has truly been instrumental in helping people with disabilities become integrated into the community.”

Focus on Dauphin County

The first LHOT collaboration was in Dauphin County. By looking at existing problems, participants from key agencies met in order to improve relationships between housing and provider agencies and determine how to better meet

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the needs of consumers. The group formed an LHOT with a common goal of providing housing and support services together. The LHOT accomplished a great deal in its first year but quickly realized that its productivity could be multiplied greatly if a fulltime staff person was hired. With commitment from the LHOT members and technical assistance, they decided to embark on a pilot project to hire a coordinator.

The Dauphin County LHOT became a leader and innovator by applying for, and receiving funds to hire the state's first fulltime LHOT Coordinator. Lynn Stewart took on this role and the Center for Independent Living of Central PA (CILCP) provided her with office space. Initially her role was primarily to identify innovative housing resources and practices and act as a liaison between the LHOT and existing housing providers/developers.

Ms. Stewart previously worked at the Dauphin County Case Management Unit and she had the advantage of knowing many of the key players in the mental health field. When she came on board, she explained "My initial goal was to become expert in all things housing in Dauphin County. I was able to get technical assistance from Diana T. Myers and Associates, Inc. and met personally with Diana Myers, Chuck Gassert, Executive

Director of the Housing Authority of the County of Dauphin and Mike Weisberg. I read everything I could from HUD and gathered information from the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania."

Ms. Stewart said, "The technical assistance for the LHOTs has been magnificent. The consultants share a wealth of information through meetings and trainings geared to specific LHOTs. I think one of the reasons Dauphin has been so successful is because we have a fulltime coordinator. My advice to all LHOTs would be to advocate for a paid fulltime position. I am always out there talking to people and that helps me bring a team feeling back to the table. The team effort is critical to the success of LHOTs."

Ms. Stewart continued, "One of the things I learned early on was that there were lots of concerns from landlords about tenants with mental health issues. Many landlords were less and less willing to accept Section 8 Housing Vouchers and reluctant to rent to people with mental illness because they did not feel qualified to serve as 'social workers'. Because of these concerns, I created a flowchart describing what action landlords could take when they felt that intervention was needed."

This did not happen over night. In order to set up the landlord communication protocol, Ms. Stewart met with landlords, county housing specialists, case managers, the director of Crisis Intervention and the Deputy Mental Health Administrator. The flowchart has become a very successful model. Landlords who want intervention can access assistance with the service system by a single call to Dauphin County Crisis Intervention. The Crisis Program facilitates an appropriate response to the situation. Ms. Stewart could not emphasize enough the importance of getting out to landlord groups, attending their meetings and getting on their agenda.

(The chart can be viewed on page 5 of the August 2005 Housing Choices Newsletter at the following website: www.pahousingchoices.org/August2005.pdf.)

Ms. Stewart has also spearheaded many other activities. The LHOT has worked with the Housing Authority of the County of Dauphin and prior to Ms. Stewart's arrival, had obtained a disability preference for people with Vouchers. Ms. Stewart explained, "Creating more housing in both the private and the public sector is a need identified by most of the LHOTs throughout the state. One of our greatest accomplishments was the recent HUD approval of a Section 811 project. The

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CILCP was the co-sponsor and we partnered with the Housing Authority of the County of Dauphin and Tri-County Housing Development Corporation. JWF Architects came on board to help with the design. This has been an incredibly exciting collaborative project.”

Ms. Stewart noted, “In Dauphin, we have about fifteen agencies involved in our LHOT although some come and go. We started out with a goal of creating 100 new housing units. We long ago reached and exceeded that goal and we are now looking at more project-based goals such as the Section 811, Fairweather

Lodges, Shelter Plus Care, etc. As for me, this has been one of the most satisfying jobs I have ever had. I have been able to have an impact at the systems level and although I don’t work with individual consumers anymore, I know that my work directly benefits them. What is very exciting is that I have recently gotten calls from local counties to meet with their LHOTs and tell them what has worked for us. To date I have met with Franklin, Huntingdon, Mifflin, Juniata, Cumberland and Lebanon Counties.”

In Conclusion

In Pennsylvania, LHOTs have

been successful at bringing agencies and individuals together on the county or multi-county level to expand housing opportunities and to seek long term solutions to the housing needs of people with disabilities. Although the specific mission, goal and priorities of the LHOTs vary, the major purpose of an LHOT is to bring together the key stakeholders in the community to identify the housing needs of people with disabilities and to take action to meet those needs. Collaboration is hard, it is a long and involved process and it is an investment of time and money. But the results, as illustrated above, have been considerable.



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the basic philosophy about housing for people with disabilities in Pennsylvania. Through all of these activities, a reeducation process is taking place that will support recovery.”

Ms. Yaffe concurs. “The end goal is to create permanent supportive housing options in safe neighborhoods around the state for people with mental illness. In order to do so, housing needs to be

independent and support services need to be flexible. We need to integrate people into existing housing and also create more options for people with disabilities. We are now working across state agency lines to make state resources work harder and more creatively. I am hopeful this will happen. I’ve been in State Government for 30 years and have never seen a Governor so committed to this charge.”

Ms. Erney added, “It is very exciting and impressive that people are willing to step up once again and do things differently. There is a renewed focus on real life needs such as housing and employment. We have a strong foundation in this state and I am very optimistic that the leadership of our stakeholders will help to move our ideas to the next level.”

OMHSAS Housing Specialist Meeting

Tuesday, September 12th, 2006

Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency
Board Room
211 North Front Street Harrisburg, PA 17101

Tentative Speaker:

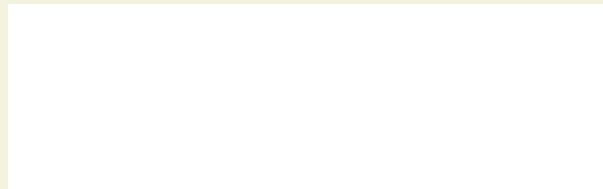
Lisa Yaffe, Deputy Executive Director
Governor's Office of Housing and Community Revitalization

*More details and parking instructions will be provided closer to the date.
For more information call Mona at 215-576-1558.*

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We welcome your submissions, ideas for articles, and information on related housing efforts and projects. If you have information about a related project or would like more information about a project described here, please contact us at the following address: Diana T. Myers and Associates, Inc., 6 South Easton Road, Glenside, PA 19038
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