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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Unlocking Opportunity: An Assessment of Barriers to Fair Housing Report

The City of Northampton has completed its report addressing barriers to affordable housing and opportunity in Northampton. The report, "Unlocking Opportunity/An Assessment of Barriers to Housing Choice in Northampton," was written by the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission under the direction of the City of Northampton and the Northampton Housing Partnership.

The project included a review of census data; laws, regulations, and policies of the city; and community engagement. Focus groups included some of those at greatest risk of housing discrimination. Engagement included a survey, a public forum, and stakeholder focus groups with social service and housing search workers, disability community advocates, housing providers, property managers, housing authorities, realtors, and government officials and staff.

The federal Fair Housing Act of 1968 and Massachusetts General Law prohibits discrimination in the sale and rental of housing by property owners, landlords, property managers, mortgage lenders, and real estate agents. The protected classes are color, national origin, disability, religion, sex, familial status, sexual orientation, age, marital status, gender expression and identity, military or veteran status, ancestry, genetic information, and receipt of public assistance or rental subsidies.

The 108-page report identified 16 barriers to accessing affordable housing and opportunity and suggested 40 potential solutions to address them. The report finds that the biggest barrier is the increasing cost of housing in Northampton. Fifty-two percent of tenants are spending more than 50% of their income for rent and utilities. Thirty percent of homeowners are spending more than 30% on their mortgage and utilities which is considered by the federal government to be "housing cost-burdened." Other barriers identified include the generational wealth disparity between white people and people of color, insufficient accessible housing for the disabled especially as the population ages, limited knowledge of fair housing laws and resources, an inadequate supply of housing needed by economically challenged families with children, the high percentage of houses with lead paint, inadequate federal and state payment maximums for subsidized housing vouchers to use in Northampton's high rent market, difficulty navigating the affordable housing system, and many others.

Many of the recommended solutions would require a longer-term approach and will require increased affordable housing funding from the federal and state government, while some are potentially achievable in the short-term. Short term solutions are translating housing applications into multiple languages, reducing the high rental application fees charged by some agencies, supporting new pilot projects with higher housing subsidy maximums, expanding lead paint remediation programming, and increasing fair housing education for tenants and property owners. The full report is available at <http://www.northamptonma.gov/2070/Fair-Housing>.

About the Northampton Housing Partnership:

Northampton's Housing Partnership, a mayoral appointed board of volunteers, and city staff will be following up on the recommended solutions. If you are interested in supporting the city's efforts to further improve housing affordability and accessibility in Northampton, please contact the Office of Planning and Sustainability.