

Thursday, January 18, 2024

Dear House General, Housing & Military Affairs and House Human Services Committees:

On behalf of the Vermont State Housing Authority (VSHA), thank you for this opportunity to present our testimony. I am Daniel Blankenship and I oversee multiple federal and state-funded grants as the Director of Homeless Programs & Policy.

For the past five years, our agency and community partners have been unable to use all of our federal homeless grant funding due to a lack of services (required by the federal government as a minimum 25% match).

Our largest Permanent Supportive Housing grant – funded by the U.S. Dept. of Housing & Urban Development (HUD)/Continuum of Care Program (CoC-PSH) - "Shelter+Care Statewide", ended the recent year with only 30% of funds used (\$1,113,873 total grant). Alarming, due to a severe lack of service and organizational capacity, this project has been virtually inactive to serving new households for several years with *all unused HUD CoC funds forfeited to the federal government* - per testimony we provided to the Legislature in 2019 and 2022 about underutilization of federal funds. The HUD CoC Program is awarded as part of an annual national competition, with utilization of funds as a performance measure, so we may see a permanent loss in the future.

Everyone served by our CoC-PSH "Shelter+Care" Programs have a disability of long duration and resided in literal homelessness (street/shelter) for 12+ months over the past three years.

People entering our CoC-PSH are the most underserved and overserved populations in Vermont, and of all our programs, with backgrounds including Corrections/criminal records, no income, no/poor credit, frequent stays with the motel program, victims of domestic & sexual violence, substance use disorders, severe mental health issues (increased or caused by homelessness itself), chronic health conditions, and increasingly, 60+.

HUD requires that CoC-PSH strictly adhere to a low barrier model and use housing first practices, as opposed to treatment-first, with "the Housing First model originated by Pathways to Housing [NYC] in 1992" (HUD's Evidence Matters: Housing First and Homelessness - Spring/Summer 2023).

As a Special Status Agency designated by the VT Dept. of Mental Health to serve persons experiencing chronic homelessness, Pathways Vermont has successfully housed hundreds of persons experiencing chronic homelessness. Pathways VT purposefully administers their services with an unmatched fidelity to housing first practices, maintains a high housing stability rate of 85%, and has become one of the few service providers to actively access our "Shelter+Care" grants in the past 4+ years.

Subsequently, the VSHA CoC-PSH grant ("Shelter+Care/Pathways") is actively, but gradually, serving new households with a utilization rate of 58% - and increasing. This success is predominantly due to last year's approval by the Legislature to expand Pathways Vermont's Housing First Program into previously unserved Bennington County.

Unfortunately, Pathways Vermont's Housing First Program is still unable to currently operate in some counties (e.g. Rutland, Lamoille, Orange, and the NE Kingdom) - thereby impairing Vermont's ability to reduce homelessness and fully utilize valuable federal funding.

According to the 2023 Vermont Point in Time Count of the Homeless, a disproportionate number of all persons experiencing homelessness were located in **Rutland County** (20%, second only to Chittenden County), with 16% of persons statewide experiencing chronic homelessness located in Rutland County.

Thank you for your time and please contact me with questions at daniel@vsha.org.

Sincerely,



Daniel Blankenship
Homeless Programs & Policy Director
Vermont State Housing Authority