

April 23, 2024

Re: Senate Committee on Appropriations proposed General Assistance Emergency Housing Program language (Draft 5.1) to H.883

Dear Members of the Senate Committee on Appropriations,

We write today in response to changes to the General Assistance Emergency Housing Program (“program”) proposed by the Senate Committee on Appropriations in H.883. Vermont continues to have one of the highest rates of unhoused people in the country,ⁱ and the proposed language in Draft 5.1 would magnify this crisis. And, as you are aware, since the program would limit eligibility to unhoused Vermonters defined as the most vulnerable, including the elderly, people with significant disabilities, children, pregnant people, and victims of domestic violence, the concerns we note below would target these already vulnerable Vermonters. To minimize these harms, we urge the Committee to bring two Committee-supported floor amendments to H.883.

- 1) **Add an appointee from both of Vermont’s Dept. of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)-recognized Continua of Care (CoC) to the General Assistance Emergency Housing Task Force.** The Chittenden County Homeless Alliance (CCHA) and the Vermont Balance of State CoC coordinate the planning and implementation of a housing and service system that meets the needs of families and individuals experiencing homelessness within Vermont, with the ultimate goal of preventing and ending homelessness. These two CoCs oversee many of the issues that the Task Force would be directed to study and make recommendations on, including the coordinated entry system and lead agencies. As passed by the House, HHAV, which serves as the collaborative applicant for the Vermont Balance of State CoC and coordinates closely with the CCHA, would have received five appointments to the Task Force. We planned to use our appointments to ensure representation from both CoCs. Since HHAV’s number of appointees has been reduced to one, we urge the Committee to add an additional appointee from CCHA and the Vermont Balance of State CoC.
- 2) **Remove the caps placed on the number of hotel and motel rooms that would be available under the program.** As passed by the House, the program would provide emergency shelter to qualifying Vermonters in need. Under Draft 5.1, there would be a nightly cap set at 1,300 hotel or motel rooms available per night during the emergency winter shelter housing period and, beginning on September 1, 2024, 1,000 rooms available per night during the non-emergency winter shelter housing period. In addition to removing the cap, **we also urge the Committee to instruct the Joint Fiscal Committee to review the program during its November 2024 meeting and make any adjustments necessary to ensure emergency shelter for unhoused Vermonters who qualify for emergency shelter under the program.** We urge these amendments for the following reasons:
 - These caps ignore the reality of Vermont’s shelter capacity: The state does not have an adequate plan to ensure shelter for those in need. There is currently a statewide shelter capacity for approximately 548 households, and all are full. The 1,539 households currently sheltered under the GA Emergency Housing Programⁱⁱ are in addition to the 548 households shelter capacity. There are also approximately 100 shelter beds under development, though it is unclear when they will be online.ⁱⁱⁱ In addition, there are 180 additional shelter beds funded in the proposed FY 25 budget, though it is also unclear when they would be online. This leaves a gap of at least 1,439 households without the GA Housing program during FY 25, and this will only be after the unknown period of time it will take for the 100 beds currently in development to be constructed and staffed. Thus, we have a shelter capacity gap of at least 1,439

households for the known future. As the data makes clear, the caps proposed would result in the loss of shelter access for potentially hundreds of unhoused vulnerable Vermonters.

- These caps create enormous contradictions within the same bill: Under this proposed language, the state recognizes that some unhoused Vermonters are so vulnerable that the state must provide them with emergency shelter while also saying that regardless of their legislatively recognized vulnerability, these same individuals will face arbitrary room caps that will leave many vulnerable Vermonters unsheltered.
- Failing to providing emergency shelter for vulnerable Vermonters in need can lead to significant preventable harms, including death. Homelessness is linked with a broad range of negative health conditions, including premature death. People experiencing homelessness also are far more likely than the general population to be a victim of crime. These harms are magnified for more vulnerable populations, who would be unsheltered under this legislation.

In addition, please find below some additional areas of concern for the Committee's consideration.

- *Changes to eligibility requirements:* As passed by the House, unhoused people 60 years of age or older would qualify for the program. Under Draft 5.1, the age is raised to unhoused people 65 years of age or older. We urge the Committee to retain the House-passed position, as it is consistent with the Act 81 "June Cohort" criteria that the legislature passed in 2023 to ensure shelter for Vermont's most vulnerable.
- *Maximum days of eligibility:* As passed by the House, if the statewide vacancy rate is less than five percent at the household's time of application, the household shall receive a maximum of 90 sheltered days under this Program per 12-month period. Under Draft 5.1, the maximum number of days is reduced to 80 days per 12-month period. In Vermont, *only 24 percent* of individuals tracked through the Housing Management Information System (HMIS) found housing within 90 days,^{iv} so any reduction in days will greatly magnify the likelihood that people will be unhoused without any realistic chance of obtaining new shelter or housing. And, the HMIS data noted above includes all individuals, and not just the most vulnerable Vermonters who would qualify for shelter under the program who often take substantially longer to secure housing because of special needs that may exist. The House-passed language of 90 days already reflected a major compromise. The reality is much starker in Vermont, as the majority of Vermonters are unable to secure housing for a period of at least 181 days.^v As this data makes clear, it is vital that Vermont invest in affordable housing as a true solution to this crisis, while committing to sheltering those in need during the interim.
- *Protect Vermonters who have experienced death of a loved one and/or are fleeing violence.* Under changes proposed in Draft 5.1, both Sec. X(a)(5) & (8) add a requirement that the cause of the loss of housing was the loss of a spouse, domestic partner, or minor child or the need to flee domestic violence or a life-threatening condition. We urge the Committee to remove the addition of the following language from both sections: "... that caused the household to lose its housing." This is new, unclear, and non-defined language that would only serve to make access to emergency shelter for traumatized Vermonters more difficult. In addition, these individuals would already be required to "attest to a lack of a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" to secure emergency shelter.

Thank you for your consideration of our requests.

Sincerely,



Frank Knaack
Executive Director

ⁱ U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, The 2023 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, Part 1 - PIT Estimates of Homelessness, Dec. 2023, p. 16, available at <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2023-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ See, Report to The Vermont Legislature Emergency Housing Transition H.171 In Accordance with Act 81 (2023), Apr. 1, 2024, available at <https://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Legislative-Reports/Act-81-Emergency-Housing-Transition-April-2024.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ February 29th Pandemic-Era Hotel/Motel Housing Reporting, Feb 29, 2024, p. 13, available at <https://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Legislative-Reports/Pandemic-Era-Housing-Report-Feb-2024.pdf>.

^{iv} This data is compiled from a HMIS CAPER Report for the period of January 1 – January 31, 2024.

^v *Id.*