



**Vermont Mayors Coalition**  
Legislative Session Goals  
2023 Legislative Session

The Vermont Mayors Coalition is advocating for State Action to support municipalities in the following areas:

**Housing**

Our housing crisis is acute and pervasive, affecting every community across the state. Our Mayors hear from employers that housing is a barrier to hiring and from public housing authorities that say waitlists to access affordable housing are growing longer, and while we seek to welcome new refugee families to our communities, these families struggle to find suitable housing. According to VHFA's 2020 [Vermont Housing Needs Assessment](#):

- 36% of Vermont households pay over 30% of their income on housing
- 16% pay more than 50% of their income on housing, placing them at significant risk for financial instability, food insecurity, eviction, and homelessness.

Housing production has ground to a proverbial halt. Before 1990, year-round housing stock in Vermont increased by 1.66% annually, meaning roughly 8 new homes were built each year for every 500 existing homes. For the last decade, that number fell to .22%, and is projected to be .18% over the next two years, or *less than one new home for every 500 existing homes*. To increase housing stock in downtowns and village centers, the State should take action on:

- **Funding for Affordable Housing:** The Legislature has \$528 million in unencumbered ARPA funds they held back last year for appropriation, and housing initiatives should be a primary focus.
- **Act 250 Reform:** In municipalities that have their own development review processes for projects, Act 250 permitting creates a duplicative process that significantly increases the expense, time, and resources that it takes for developers to bring new housing projects to construction. This burdensome, unpredictable process ultimately increases the cost of housing and has a chilling effect on housing production and downtown investment, stalling, and in some cases stopping, the new construction we badly need to reverse Vermont's acute housing crisis.

The Mayors believe that the single most significant action the State could take to stimulate housing development statewide is to reform Act 250 to delegate compliance to municipalities with their own robust permitting and design and review processes.

This is an urgent problem that has already been studied many times. To cite just one example, in 2004 the Vermont Council on Planning wrote: “A frequent complaint about Vermont’s permit process is that permit seekers need to present the same information to multiple entities, ranging from municipalities for local zoning and subdivision permits, to state agencies for state permits, to district commissions for permits through Act 250. Both planners and customers of the system say that the system of planning and permitting is unwieldy and inefficient.”

Implementation of this needed change amidst an acute housing crisis should not be delayed while the state seeks broader, comprehensive updating of the fifty-year old Act 250 legislation.

- **Downtown and Village / Manufactured Housing Tax Credits:** The Mayors ask the Legislature to increase Downtown and Village / Manufactured Housing Tax Credits to invest in the creation of new affordable housing. This effort can simultaneously move us forward in our Climate Action Plan goals to decrease emissions due to transit. The coalition also continues to support weatherization efforts that further move us forward on both climate goals and housing quality and affordability.

### Homelessness

The State, with unprecedented federal funding, took extraordinary action during the pandemic to house vulnerable Vermonters. However, the economic pressures of the pandemic, increasing housing costs, diminishing housing stock, an accelerating opioid crisis, and other social pressures have collided and now, more Vermonters are living in homelessness than ever before.

The most recent annual PIT Counts conducted by the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness found:

- From 2021 to 2022, the number of persons experiencing homelessness increased 7.3%, from 2591 to 2780;
- From 2020 to 2021, the number of persons experiencing homelessness more than doubled, from 1110 to 2591 individuals.

Our towns and cities, housing authorities, non-profits, housing developers, and service providers are working hard to ensure housing as a human right in Vermont. The Mayors believe that the State must do its part by taking action in two key areas; strengthening coordinated entry and planning for the end of the motel voucher program. New initiatives for housing and homelessness should include:

- **Funding for non-time-limited supportive housing services and case management services** that connect homeless households with available units. Federal Continuum of Care funding allows for rental assistance for permanent supportive housing. Every year, eligible communities return significant unused rental assistance funds because we are unable to fund the permanent supportive housing services or to identify the available units that must be paired with it. Specifically, there is a great need statewide for congregate supportive housing for residents with disabilities.
- **Planning for the end of the motel voucher program:** The Mayors are seeking a plan, coordinated with municipalities, for the planned end of the current hotel voucher program

including funding for new transitional, supportive housing units. The City of Burlington has taken an innovative approach, deploying over \$1 million of local ARPA funds to establish a temporary emergency shelter on City-owned land using pre-fabricated shelter units. The Mayors support the use of State-owned land for similar temporary, supportive shelters.

### **Mental Health**

Years of chronic underinvestment in systems to care for Vermonters experiencing a mental health crisis have collided with increasing needs following the pandemic. Providers, law enforcement, and communities are struggling to give people appropriate support. Action by the State is needed to:

- **Provide specialized care for violent individuals.** Vermont's patients, communities, and hospitals need space for safe, specialized care for violent individuals. Vermont's Emergency Departments are not equipped to provide this type of care, and staff has been injured. Up-fitting (both physical space and adding necessary staff) four of the existing (vacant) beds at Vermont's Psychiatric Care Hospital for evaluation, stabilization, and treatment would ensure patient needs are met.
- **Fund programs specifically for pediatric mental health care**, including early intervention and prevention.
- **Expand funding for personnel** (including for both municipal police departments and regional programs) who are not sworn officers and have experience working with populations experiencing mental health crises, homelessness, and substance use disorder who can both co-deploy with first responders and provide appropriate follow-up and support following incidents that require a law enforcement response for a mental health crisis.

### **Substance Use Disorder**

Prior to 2020, the State of Vermont and many municipalities were able to make strides in combatting the opioid crisis. Since 2020, we've experienced a tragic backslide, and in 2022, we will suffer a historic high in the number of opioid and drug-related deaths in our communities.

The Mayors are asking state leaders to not simply return to business as usual in our fight against the opioid crisis, but to recognize that the nature of substance use disorder and its effective treatments have changed and to redouble our efforts to:

- **Improve access to Medications for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD)**, including methadone, which we know is a more effective treatment for fentanyl use;
- **Increase responses to growing methamphetamine use** such as expanding the Contingency Management pilot currently underway in Chittenden County;
- **Expand re-entry support for justice-involved individuals** with substance use disorder;
- **Expand in-state residential treatment opportunities for substance use disorder**, including long-term treatment

### **Public Safety**

Since the onset of the pandemic, communities across the country have experienced an increase in some types of violent crimes, and Vermont is not immune. The recent increase in gun crimes across our state is unacceptable. Vermont has experienced 20 homicides in 2022, and in 18 of those crimes, guns were used. Nationally, for the fourth year in a row, the United States has experienced more than 600 mass shootings. State government has a duty to act to protect our communities from these preventable deaths.

While the need for experienced, dedicated first responders and good, 21<sup>st</sup> century community policing is increasing, we are facing historic challenges in recruiting and retaining law enforcement professionals. Vermont's cities need State assistance, as smaller departments struggle to compete with the larger state and federal agencies. The Mayors ask the Legislature and the Governor to support:

- **Common Sense gun laws** that require the safe storage of handguns and prohibit firearms in bars. All other New England states have safe storage legislation and 11 states ban guns in bars, including rural states like Alaska, Kentucky, and North Dakota.
- **Police Academy reform** to create a non-residential alternative the Vermont Police Academy to support municipalities in recruiting new officers from our own diverse communities.
- **Funding for recruitment and retention** of law enforcement professionals.
- **Improved dispatch services** to create a mindful, fair and equitable system that will provide parity among communities that currently pay for emergency dispatch services from their general funds, with those that receive these services for free through the State.
- **Modernizing shoplifting regulation** to provide meaningful accountability for repeat misdemeanor-level offenses. Our merchants are experiencing huge losses from organized, repeat shoplifting incidents, which jeopardizes our small, local retailers and our ability to support thriving local economies and safe, vibrant downtowns.

### **Childcare Funding**

The cost and availability of childcare in Vermont is holding our families, businesses, and communities back. We hear from Vermont businesses that childcare is a significant issue and a barrier to growing our workforce and that businesses lose both experienced workers and new, qualified recruits who are not able to find or afford reliable high-quality childcare.

State support is necessary to ensure that no family pays more than 10% of their income on childcare, and to support providers in building a resilient, adequate, excellent childcare system for all children in Vermont. The Mayors support action this Legislative session to:

- **Support early childhood educators** through higher wages, better benefits, and appropriate training and professional resources.
- **Make childcare affordable for every family**, and ensure that no household pays over 10% of their income on childcare.
- **Improve governance of Vermont's childcare system** by consolidating oversight of childcare providers and early childhood education programs to a single state agency.

- **Make childcare accessible in every community.** Let's Grow Kids estimates that over 8,700 children in Vermont do not have access to the care they need. We must grow our workforce of skilled providers and improve our physical capacity statewide.
- **Strengthen equity** through programs to support families of color, families with children with disabilities, and other marginalized communities in accessing the childcare services they need. We know that access to excellent early childhood education is one of the strongest social determinants of health. In order to build a more equitable future, we must create an equitable and high-quality early childcare system.

### **Public Transit Funding**

Public transit is a critical support for our workforce and is an essential service for many of our neighbors to reach healthcare, education and training opportunities, and other critical social services. Last-mile connections and off-hours rides to hospitals and doctors' appointments are underfunded and in short supply, leaving some Vermonters without private vehicles unable to access care and economic opportunity.

Improved public transportation is also a critical piece of helping Vermont meet Climate Action Plan goals by reducing the number of private cars on the roads and the emissions they create. Reliable and frequent service is key to making public transportation a viable choice for Vermonters, and the burden of municipal contributions to public transportation budgets cannot keep increasing, especially while the service provided is still lacking.

We must also plan for an impending shortfall in Gas Tax revenues that support public transit as more commuters transition to electric vehicles.

**The Mayors support steps to strengthen our public transit system, including implementing a new or adjusted revenue source to fund public transportation.**