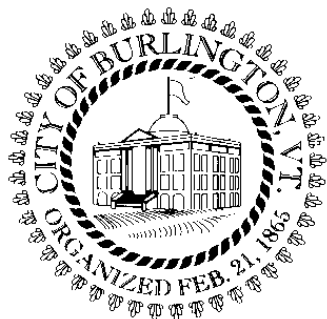


**CHITTENDEN COUNTY HOMELESS ALLIANCE**  
*Working to End Homelessness*



**MEMORANDUM**

To: House Committee on Human Services, Senate Committee on Health and Welfare  
From: Sarah Russell, Special Assistant to End Homelessness, City of Burlington and  
Co-chair, Chittenden County Homeless Alliance  
Date: October 5, 2023  
Re: Impacts, Successes, Challenges, and Recommendations on Implementing H.171 in  
Chittenden County

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This testimony is provided on behalf of both the City of Burlington and the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance.

**Chittenden County Homeless Alliance**

The Chittenden County Homeless Alliance (CCHA), comprised of nearly 30 representatives is our local Continuum of Care and local decision-making body for allocation of HUD funding, policy development, and systems-level work. In addition to the Steering Committee which meets once per month, we have a number of sub-committee that focus on and tackle specific strategies including Coordinated Entry, Strategic Planning, NOFO and Ranking (which reviews the annual HUD release of funding opportunities, prepares and ranks collaborative application on behalf of the Continuum), Outreach and Membership, and Data Quality sub-committees. All committee and sub-committee meetings are open to the public and we especially encourage people with lived experience of homelessness or housing insecurity to participate and provide feedback on systems improvement.

**City of Burlington Housing and Homelessness Initiatives**

The City of Burlington has long supported initiatives to address Vermont's housing crisis and support unsheltered homelessness. In December 2021, Mayor Weinberger announced a 10-point Action Plan to Fulfill the Promise of Housing as Human Right.<sup>1</sup> Among those initiatives was the creation the Special Assistant to End Homelessness within the Administration to be accountable for the City's policies and programs that address homelessness. Since 2021, the Administration has made progress on all 10 initiatives which include a goal to double the rate of housing development, strategies to increase housing availability including through re-zoning, investments to strengthen Coordinated Entry, \$5 million of directed ARPA spending for housing and homelessness initiatives,

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<sup>1</sup> Mayor Weinberger's 10-Point Action Plan to Fulfill the Promise of Housing as a Human Right:  
<https://www.burlingtonvt.gov/sites/default/files/Mayor%20Miro%20Weinberger%E2%80%99s%202021%20Action%20Plan%20to%20Fulfill%20the%20Promise%20of%20Housing%20as%20a%20Human%20Right%20in%20Burlington.pdf>

the creation of new low-barrier shelter with a public health approach, and increased funding to our Housing Trust Fund for the creation of permanently affordable units – which is now up 400%<sup>2</sup>.

**As a result of the ending of the State’s Emergency Shelter Program, Burlington and Chittenden County has experienced a more than 175% increase in the unsheltered population over the last year.**

The number of people living unsheltered right now is more than we have ever witnessed in Chittenden County. Since these motel program closures, unsheltered homelessness has increased from 100 self-reports to the Community Resource Center in March 2023 to a high of 227 self-reports in July 2023. We suspect these numbers are low as they only reflect people who are willing to share their living situation.

While maintaining accurate data of unsheltered populations remains a challenge, we do have information from prior efforts that articulates this dramatic increase following the June 1 ESD motel exists:

- In summer of 2022, Chittenden County outreach teams comprised of services providers representing eight community organizations reported engaging with approximately 80 unsheltered individuals.<sup>3</sup>
- In November 2022, data from pre-2022 Adverse Weather Conditions season revealed 105 individuals were unsheltered.
- The January 2023 point-in-time count recorded 43 individuals living unsheltered in the County.

With the estimated number living unsheltered in the greater Burlington area to be over 220 people currently, *the percentage of unsheltered people among homeless populations has likely increased by more than 120% in the period between January 2023 and July 2023, and more than 175% over the last year.* This increase is shocking, considering that since 2019 Chittenden County has doubled its shelter capacity from 149 emergency shelter beds to 319 today, with the great majority of new emergency shelter beds at Burlington’s two new low-barrier facilities at Elmwood Emergency Shelter Community (currently operated by CHT) and the Champlain Inn (currently operated by CVOEO). Just under 90% of all emergency shelter in the County is located within the City of Burlington.

Since May, the City of Burlington has continuously appealed to the Agency of Human Services for support to expand shelter capacity even further, and to expand services for people living without shelter. As of last Friday, we have obtained a funding award from AHS for a temporary overnight shelter and are rapidly implementing this critical project to open by December 15<sup>th</sup>.

In response to this dramatic increase in unsheltered homelessness, the CCHA formed an ad-hoc sub-committee, comprised of shelter and service leaders, to develop a strategy to address and respond to unsheltered homelessness.

This group identified five strategies to focus on over the coming months including:

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<sup>2</sup> The City of Burlington tracks and shares data to support these initiatives, it is available on the BTV Stat Data hub: <https://data.burlingtonvt.gov/pages/housing>

<sup>3</sup> <sup>1</sup> CORA and CE Outreach (CVOEO); COTS Motel Outreach; Burlington, Essex, Colchester Police Depts.; Spectrum; Safe Harbor PATH; Urban Park Rangers; Howard Center Street and Community Outreach

- Increase emergency shelter capacity for adults, and safe sleeping options as expanded shelter comes online
- Expand access to field-based healthcare for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness
- Rethink, expand, and redeploy street outreach teams
- Expand medical respite capacity (both medical and mental health)
- Continue to expand access to permanent supportive housing for people experiencing chronic homelessness, and advocate for additional specialized long term care options for older Vermonters who are homeless

In addition to these strategies, the workgroup identified two areas that, while are outside the scope of the Alliance, have much overlap and are critical to our work:

- Advocate that local and State plans and funding include development of overdose prevention centers
- Advocate for increased length of stay for substance use disorder (previously 28-days, now 10-days) and stable settings (housing, program, etc.) for discharge

**Implementation of H.171 through Chittenden County Coordinate Entry has continued since the City of Burlington and CCHA first submitted LOI's in June 2023<sup>i</sup>.**

Following the passage of H.171 and on July 30, 2023, Chittenden County motels housed 256 households- which became known as the June cohort. At that time, approximately 90 of these households were not enrolled in Coordinated Entry. Outreach teams from Community Health Centers, Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity, Committee on Temporary Shelter, and Burlington Police Department have since worked in close collaboration to enroll nearly 70 of these households into our Coordinated Entry system. The households they were unable to connect with or who refused to enroll in Coordinated Entry had at minimum three attempted engagements.

Currently, there are 177 households enrolled in Coordinated Entry from the June Cohort, and work to connect them to permanent housing is underway:

- Between January and August 2023, the Chittenden County Coordinated Entry system has assisted 176 households with identifying permanent housing placement.
- In October 2023, two new housing developments will open in Chittenden County and therefore, we have 56 pending referrals to permanent units, with rental subsidy and long-term services when needed.
- We currently there are 9 pending referrals to rapid re-housing or permanent supportive housing programs.
- We expect to be on pace with our projected rate of housing placement of 25 households per month for this cohort as of the end of October.
- Beginning next week, case consultation will take place for June cohort households to ensure they are progressing toward permanent housing. These weekly case conference sessions, facilitated by the AHS Panel Managers for Chittenden County, will work toward establishing shared care plans for households. Currently, 82 households have shared care plans and we anticipate this to substantially grow once the case conferencing sessions begin.

**As we work to implement H.171, several serious challenges persist, including:**

- Lack of capacity among service providers. Our social service agencies continue to be exhausted by the level of need they respond to in the community and lack capacity, staffing, and ability to expand and/or grow new programs at this time.

- Extensive wait-times for case management. One symptom of the staffing challenges is the extraordinary wait times for households to be connected to case management services; the wait time is currently 6 weeks between Coordinated Entry enrollment to initial meeting with a housing case manager.
- Ineffective data sharing. Our ability to obtain data from Economic Services Division (ESD) remains difficult. For the Coordinated Entry system to be effective -- precise sub-population-level data for the June cohort is essential. While this information is compiled and reported on a statewide level, we have been unable to obtain it for the county level. This is problematic as it forces us to build new reports, create workarounds, and quite literally compare spreadsheets line-by-line.
- Excessive wait time for re-certification. Households within the June cohort must recertify on 14- or 30-day intervals. Case Managers report spending up to seven hours waiting on hold to recertify just one household. Most households utilize prepaid cell phones and are unable to accommodate these extended wait times. It is unknown how many households in Chittenden County (or statewide) were exited from the motels due to not being able to recertify. It would be most helpful for the recertification process (and overall communication between ESD and motel households) to be user-friendly- and to reflect the preferred means of communication by people who use this, such as apps, texts, and other means of virtual communication.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In order to effectively address these challenges, we must expand the partnership and collaboration between municipalities, service and housing providers, and state agencies. County-wide Coordinated Entry systems must have free access to current data. Client's in motel shelter must have improved, direct communication with ESD. Local communities should be consulted prior to eligibility and program changes and our providers who are implementing these policies and programs should be part of decision-making. We need the State to take leadership in the creation of new shelter capacity and increased supportive services to address the historic and unacceptable levels of unsheltered homelessness happening now. The City of Burlington and the CCHA believe that homelessness is solvable – and that we all must hold shared-accountability in solving it.

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<sup>1</sup> City of Burlington June LOI:

<https://www.burlingtonvt.gov/sites/default/files/City%20of%20Burlington%20LOI%20FINAL.pdf> and the CCHA June LOI: <https://www.burlingtonvt.gov/sites/default/files/CCHA%20-%20AHS%20LOI%2006-09-2023.pdf>