

My name is Sarah Russell and I am the Special Asst. to End Homelessness for the City of Burlington and the co-Chair of the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance

The City of Burlington and the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance have serious concerns and questions about AHS' proposed plan to end the pandemic-era motel program, and instead support extending motel stays while we continue housing everyone – which will be less expensive and more effective.

We believe new investments in expansion of emergency shelter should be made for the hundreds of Vermonters currently living outside.

Officials from AHS have reported new temporary shelters would serve about 225 people from the motel program, which leaves a remaining 500-600 households from the June Cohort without shelter of any kind after April 1, 2024. It's widely known the households in the June Cohort are comprised of our most vulnerable community members including families with children, elderly, and people receiving home health services.

Beginning with 256 households in the June Cohort, Chittenden County social service providers have diligently connected over 130 households to permanent housing and other supports. According to the most recent data from Economic Services, the June Cohort has been reduced to 116 households to date.

***The proposal and subsequent plan to prioritize these households for permanent housing placements is working. If we stay on this track, we can house everyone from the pandemic-era program by June 1 2024.***

If these households lose access to stable shelter on April 1, as AHS is proposing, providers will no longer be able to connect with them in the same way. Without the stability of shelter, households will no longer be able to focus on moving toward permanent housing as *the priority becomes survival*. In Chittenden County, the average wait-time for households to be connected to housing navigation is 12-weeks from the time they enter our Coordinated Entry system. This will only be exacerbated by the forced exits from the stability of shelter within motels.

**The cost projections for the proposed temporary shelters would shelter half as many people for twice as much money.**

**The memos I will provide committee members lay out that math.**

**Turning out hundreds more people in April to live without shelter is not acceptable. Any increase in emergency shelter capacity must be dedicated to people experiencing unsheltered homelessness.**

**In Chittenden County alone, the impact of the June 1 2023 motel exits has resulted in a 500% increase in unsheltered homelessness, from an estimated 40 individuals at the last PIT count in January to over 250 individuals as of November 2023.**

Local (and statewide) emergency motel capacity has been fully utilized. There is zero motel capacity in Chittenden County currently and no shelter capacity. There are about 350 shelter beds in the County, full, with about 90% of those located in Burlington.

Anecdotally, a mother who was 6-days postpartum and had a two year old was referred by Economic Services to seek accommodation from Burlington's low-barrier warming shelter for herself, toddler, and

her infant last week. The warming shelter (providing service to adults-only) currently serves someone with cancer, someone with a colostomy bag, and one pregnant person, in addition to many others with critical medical, mental health, and substance use challenges. Since beginning operation on December 15<sup>th</sup>, the shelter has been over anticipated capacity (30), serving 34 guests nightly. To date, the shelter has provided bednights to over 100! individuals, turning away people each evening.

Just this morning, while discussing plans for Extreme Cold Weather Shelters in Chittenden County, we had to face the harsh reality that the shelter at the Miller Community Center accommodates up to 120 people- which falls 130 people short of ensuring shelter for all during extreme cold weather events. This is unacceptable.

Burlington has invested considerably in creating new outreach staff in the BPD, parks, and fire departments and they are overwhelmed by encampments across parks and public lands, where people are living in tents without access to heat, facilities, or resources to meet their basic needs. As encampments grow, they can become public health and safety concerns, most recently demonstrated by a fire in Battery Park over the holiday week.

Aside from being inhumane, increases in unsheltered homelessness result in an exhausted emergency response, serious public health and safety issues, and a crisis-oriented system which is not designed to operate in an indefinite manner.

Finally, at first I felt concern that by delivering this testimony during a public safety forum conflated the challenges related to homelessness and public safety- however, what I wish to highlight is that people without shelter are far more vulnerable to violence and crime in our communities. Without the safety of a home, people living unsheltered are far more likely to be the victims of theft and assault, which are dangers they must confront on a daily basis.

**Rapidly shifting direction creates chronic instability on a system that is already maxed.**

Without stability of the emergency shelter system, just as our clients cannot focus on permanent housing efforts, neither can we. Without clear communication and partnership, service providers, legislators, and stakeholders continue to play catch-up and are unable to be proactive. Should the motel program end, we must recognize that the work to end homelessness does not. *What is needed now, more than ever, is stability of existing shelter, expansion of emergency shelter, reliance on best practices (including Coordinated Entry), adequate funding for services, and long-range strategic leadership and planning in partnership with local communities.*