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**Report to**  
**The Vermont Legislature**

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**GENERAL ASSISTANCE EMERGENCY HOUSING REPORT**

**In Accordance with 2013 Act 50, Sec E.321.2**

**An act relating to making appropriations for the support of government**

**Submitted to:** House Committee on Appropriations  
House Committee on General, Housing and Military  
Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs

**Submitted by:** Hal Cohen, Secretary, AHS

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**Report Date:** July 31, 2016



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## Executive Summary

As a part of the 2013 Appropriations Act, the General Assembly directed the Department for Children and Families (DCF) in the Agency of Human Services (AHS) to continue administering an emergency housing program within the General Assistance (GA) program. That program allows for the provision of emergency housing in catastrophic situations, for certain vulnerable populations, and during inclement weather under the Cold Weather Exemption (CWE). The Act also created flexibility when providing those services through the GA program in order "to mitigate poverty and serve applicants more effectively than they are currently being served with the same amount of General Assistance funds."

The Act required AHS to develop:

- (1) An intake system for individuals and families receiving emergency housing services including collection of basic statistical information about the clients served;
- (2) A system to track payments to motels; and
- (3) A system for ensuring the safety and health of clients who are housed in motels.

The act, as amended in 2015 through Act 172, also requires the submission of an annual report to the legislature. This report must contain data relating to the use of emergency housing vouchers from the preceding state fiscal year. The data must contain information specific to key program areas including:

- demographic information,
- de-identified client data,
- shelter and motel usage rates,
- clients' primary stated cause of homelessness, and
- the average lengths of stay in emergency housing by demographic group and by type of housing,
- and such other relevant data as the Secretary deems appropriate.

Below, and included in the appendices, are data and information related to these statutory mandates.

## General Assistance Housing Program Management

Intake and eligibility for General Assistance emergency housing is determined in each of the Economic Services Division's (ESD) 12 district offices.

Vermonters seeking emergency housing apply at the local ESD office where they are seen for an intake interview and eligibility determination the same day. Emergency housing applicants are seen on a first-come, first-served basis. Vermont 2-1-1 handles after-hour and weekend calls. Applicants seeking emergency housing after hours or on weekends are provisionally housed by Vermont 2-1-1 if they meet basic eligibility criteria, and are required to go to an ESD office to receive subsequent emergency housing authorization. Those who fail to appear in the ESD office are denied additional housing until they comply with this program requirement.

Local ESD offices communicate daily with 2-1-1 and local homeless shelters. ESD staff are in regular contact with local shelters to learn the number of available beds for that night. This information is shared at the end

of each day with 2-1-1 so that they know which shelters have available beds. This system works well and assures that shelters, where they exist, remain the first resource for homeless families and individuals needing emergency housing.

Subsequent to discussions with Legal Services Law Line of Vermont, Inc. and Disability Rights Vermont, the Department for Children and Families piloted block scheduling in the Burlington district office for people with disabilities or for those who cannot wait in a public waiting room for safety reasons. Applicants are given an appointment window of two hours and meet with an eligibility worker within that time frame. During this pilot time period, the request for a scheduled appointment must be made through an advocate acting on the client's behalf, at one of our community partner organizations (e.g. CVOEO, Women Helping Battered Women, and Vermont Legal Aid). The pilot was put into place and a memo was sent out alerting interested parties of the pilot and the availability of this scheduling option.

## Program Resources

Current program resources include:

### I. **Harbor Place:**

ESD and the Agency of Human Services Director of Housing worked over the summer and fall of 2013 to build greater shelter capacity throughout the state, particularly in Chittenden County which is the primary driver of the GA emergency housing budget. On November 1, 2013 the Harbor Place (HP) transitional program began sheltering and serving its first families. The facility was opened under the management of Champlain Housing Trust (CHT) with significant financial investment from DCF. These funds supported the renovation of the facility from its former use as a motel and secured DCF access to 30 rooms at a cost of \$38 per night. This arrangement guarantees ESD a minimum number of beds in Chittenden County at about 40 percent savings compared to motel costs. Additionally, community partners such as Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity (CVOEO), Women Helping Battered Women (WHBW) and Safe Harbor have committed case management and other resources to help Harbor Place residents identify and address underlying needs and barriers to securing housing. There are bi-weekly check-in calls with community partners, 2-1-1, CHT, Harbor Place and DCF Economic Services Division.

In addition to the 30 contracted rooms, Harbor Place has 20 rooms potentially available at an average cost of \$38 per night. The average Burlington area motel costs \$62 per night. The following data reflect the average number of beds used per night for the contracted rooms:

During SFY16, a total of 7,840 nights at Harbor Place were granted, with 800 of those nights when the Cold Weather Exception (CWE) was in effect.

### II. **Warming Shelters:**

Several communities set up local warming shelters for homeless individuals to have a warm and safe place to sleep with AHS and DCF support. All together DCF currently supports nine warming shelters located in Middlebury, Springfield, Brattleboro, Bellows Falls area, Hartford, Barre, Burlington, Newport and St. Johnsbury.

The Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA) warming shelter in St. Johnsbury as well as the Good Samaritan Haven overflow shelter in Barre opened the first week in December 2015. In Middlebury, the Charter House warming shelter for families opened in early November. NEKCA's Newport warming shelter opened much later in the winter.

The Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS) operated a new low-barrier Winter Warming Shelter in Burlington with a permitted capacity of 43 beds. The shelter ran from November 3, 2015 through March 30, 2016. Over the course of the season, it provided shelter for 240 unduplicated guests with an 11-day average length of stay. COTS recorded that 57% of guests self-reported mental health problems or combined mental health and substance abuse problems. More detailed information can be found in COTS' Winter Warming Shelter Final Report (May 2016).

With a high level of coordination and communication between Economic Services and local shelters (warming and year-round), these resources provide alternatives to motels, help reduce costs, and offer enhanced services to homeless families and individuals. Prioritization of emergency housing referrals for persons experiencing homelessness in Chittenden County is currently to a shelter first, then to Harbor Place, and then a motel. In other regions of the state, shelters continue to play a significant role in providing bed capacity and housing options within the local homeless Continuum of Care.

The increased need for day shelters in communities with warming shelters has become ever more apparent as people, often with medical needs experiencing homelessness, require a warm, safe place during the day.

### **Community-Based Alternatives to General Assistance Motels**

In August 2015, the Department for Children and Families issued a memo inviting community-based organizations to offer proposals for alternative crisis bed capacity and service delivery models to decrease reliance on motels to meet emergency shelter needs. DCF provided data on GA motel voucher usage by district and eligibility for the previous year, then met with local homeless Continua of Care to answer questions and provide technical assistance based on the AHS adopted Family Connections Framework from the US Interagency Council on Homelessness. Proposed alternatives are expected to bring cost savings to the State through stronger outcomes for families and individuals, more effective service connections, and general cost comparison. All proposals are expected to meet DCF shelter standards as well as form close referral partnerships with the local Economic Services Division office.

A Request for Proposals was issued to provide funding for "community-based alternatives" to motel use for temporary housing. Interested communities submitted proposals to the DCF Housing Team, a collaboration of Economic Services (ESD) and the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). These GA-funded community-based alternatives are administered by OEO to align with existing performance measures, shelter monitoring, and project standards. For FY16, DCF awarded a total of \$788,544 in grants to 11 organizations providing community-based solutions in meeting emergency housing needs of Vermonters (a small portion of the grant funds were not spent). These grants were used to provide or increase the availability of

seasonal warming shelters; emergency shelters; short-term transitional housing and services for homeless families with children; emergency housing for youth; and emergency housing and services for victims fleeing violence. Establishing these new community-based projects leveraged thousands of hours of in-kind project support from community partners, each representing significant planning and start-up effort. Altogether, these projects provided 73 beds and 39 rooms of additional crisis capacity across Vermont.

Of particular note is an alternative in Brattleboro which began in January. This pilot shifted the domestic violence motel pool from ESD to the local sister agency, the Women’s Freedom Center. This arrangement allowed the partner organization to screen, shelter, and offer services directly rather than through the local ESD office. Access to case management and services helps reduce the length of stay in motels and provides a better and more frequent connection to services offered by the sister agency.

### **Data Collection Processes**

The 12 ESD district offices collect the following data daily and submit a weekly spreadsheet to ESD central office for a monthly and year-to-date statewide compilation:

- Total number of emergency housing requests
- Emergency housing requests granted/denied
- Number of singles granted/denied housing
- Number of families granted/denied housing
- Number of adults and children in households requesting and granted housing
- Number of eligible catastrophic requests/number granted
- Number of categorically-eligible vulnerable population requests/number granted
- Number of eligible vulnerable points requests/number granted
- Total number of nights authorized/average cost per night/total cost for authorized nights
- Number of Cold Weather Exception grants/number of adults granted under CWE/number of children granted under CWE
- Number of Cold Weather Exception nights authorized/average cost per night/total cost for CWE nights authorized

The above data are collected manually in the district and central offices as DCF’s ACCESS system is not designed to collect this data. Payments for emergency housing are made based on motel billing through ESD authorization forms. Once billing is received from a motel by ESD, the local district office authorizes payment through the ACCESS system which generates payment to the motel. The Department for Children & Families Business Office generates a monthly report reflecting all payments made for emergency housing.

### **Health and Safety Assurances**

ESD sought assistance from the Vermont Department of Health (VDH) regarding health and safety standards for the motels ESD uses for emergency housing. VDH conducts routine sanitation inspections at licensed lodging establishments. As VDH is scheduled to do yearly inspections, ESD requests inspection reports for motels in January for the previous calendar year. We requested and received current inspections for all lodging establishments used by Economic Services during the 2015 calendar year.

## Program Rules

The expedited vulnerable population rules for emergency housing in effect from July 1, 2013 were incorporated into permanent rules effective March 28, 2015. A summary of emergency housing requests, including catastrophic and vulnerable populations, for SFY16:

- **13,262** applications were received (a 53% reduction from the prior year), of these:
  - **8,697** were granted; **4,565** were denied.
  - **5,662** singles were granted; **3,398** singles were denied.
  - **3,035** families were granted; **1,167** families were denied.
  - Of the **14,681** adults in households requesting emergency housing; **9,556 (2,285** unduplicated adults) were granted.
  - Of the **7,392** children in households requesting emergency housing; **5,348 (1,259** unduplicated children) were granted.
  - **3,384** applications were found eligible under the catastrophic criteria, over **81%** of these due to domestic violence.
  - **1,545** applications were found eligible under the vulnerable population criteria, over **57%** of these were eligible as recipients of Social Security disability income.
  - **30** applications were found eligible under vulnerable points (see eligibility criteria).
  - **26** days was the average length of stay for households with children, down from **28** days the prior year.
  - **19** days was the average length of stay for single adult households, down from **22** days the prior year.

**35,892** bed nights were paid for at an average cost of **\$73/night**.

**7,040** bed nights were contracted through Harbor Place.

## Cold Weather Exception

This past winter, there were a total of 96 calendar days during which the Cold Weather Exception (CWE) was in effect in one or more districts; 3,721 requests were received and 4,745 bed nights were provided at an average cost of \$73 per night. The chart below is an analysis for the winters of SFY14-SFY16:

COLD WEATHER EXCEPTION ANALYSIS FOR SFY14 - SFY16			
CWE Measure	SFY14	SFY15	SFY16
Nights Meeting Criteria*	154	133	93
Requests for Emergency Housing	6,835	12,279	3,721
Number of Motel Nights	16,542	26,226	4,745
Avg. Number Motel Rooms Per CWE Night	107	197	41
Number of Adults	7,338	13,152	3,961
Number of Children	1,558	3,370	1,334
Cost	\$983,443	\$1,833,587	\$344,441

\*The first CWE night: SFY14 - 10/25/13; SFY15 - 11/2/14; and SFY16 - 11/17/15.

\*The last CWE night: SFY14 - 4/25/14; SFY15 - 4/8/15; and SFY16 - 4/27/16.

The significant decrease in motel room usage and cost in SFY16 is due to the milder winter and the increase of community based alternatives.

## Conclusion

Despite encouraging signs in many areas, challenges remain. Motel usage in some regions of the state, particularly in the Rutland area, continues to be high increasing from \$850,000 in SFY15 to \$1,000,000 in SFY16. DCF is working through multiple avenues to understand and address the causes of this high utilization. We will continue to work through our internal systems and with community partners to find a solution to this difficult situation.

Across the state, there appears to have been an increase in individuals seeking emergency housing as a result of fleeing domestic or sexual violence. DCF is actively looking into this trend – connecting with community partners and working with domestic violence organizations to determine what solutions, such as the motel pool in Brattleboro and increased shelter capacity, might effectively address this issue while also reducing reliance on motels for emergency housing.

It is worthwhile to note, however, that overall spending on emergency housing was down significantly relative to the previous fiscal year. Over the course of SFY15, ESD spent approximately \$4.3 million on emergency housing in motels whereas SFY16 saw a total expenditure of approximately \$3 million. This shift is encouraging but should be regarded with cautious optimism. Although surely helped by a milder winter, the positive impact of the community-based alternatives to GA motels should not be underestimated. Not only has that model showed promising signs of offering communities and Vermonters a better, more service-based means of addressing homelessness across the state, it does so at a reduced expense compared to motels.

In FY17, we look forward to improving on the progress already made. We will continue evaluating the processes and systems through which we deliver emergency housing benefits while striving to provide vulnerable Vermonters with the assistance they need.



## APPENDIX A: Aggregate GA Housing

Total # housing requests	# of housing requests Granted	# of housing requests Denied	# singles Granted housing	# singles Denied housing	# families Granted housing	# families Denied housing	# of adults Granted	# of children Granted	Catastrophic Granted
13,262	8,697	4,565	5,662	3,398	3,035	1,167	9,556	5,348	3,383
Auto. Vulnerable Granted	Points Vulnerable Granted	Total # of Nights Paid	Average cost per night	Average Total Costs	CWE household requests	#adults housed under CWE	#children housed under CWE	# of nights paid for	
1,545	30	35,892	72.91	\$2,616,884	3,721	3,961	1,334	4,745	

- Total # of Harbor Place Nights: 7,040
- Total # of CWE Harbor Place Nights: 800

### Potential Denial Reasons

- Used Max days 28/84
- No Verification provided
- Not meeting with worker
- Not spending 30% towards meeting housing need
- Didn't follow up with Housing provider

## APPENDIX B: GA Housing Denial Data

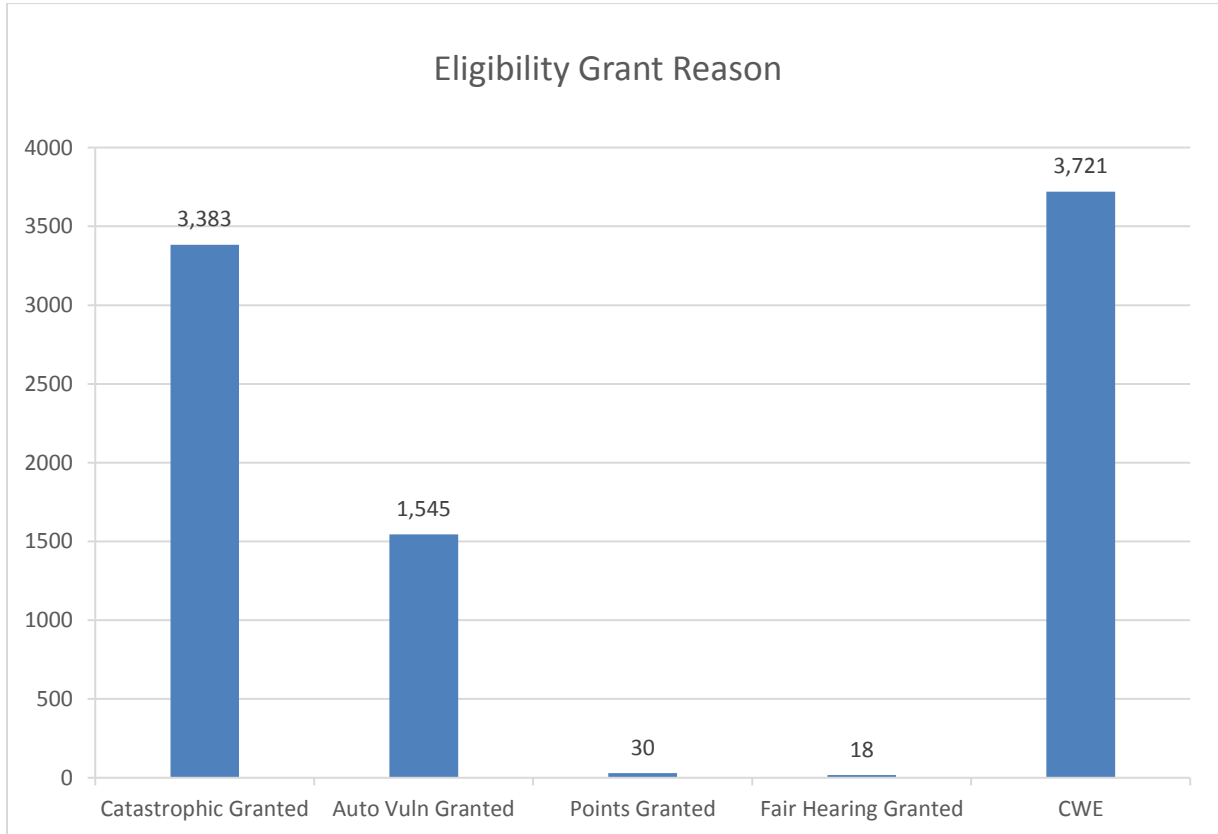
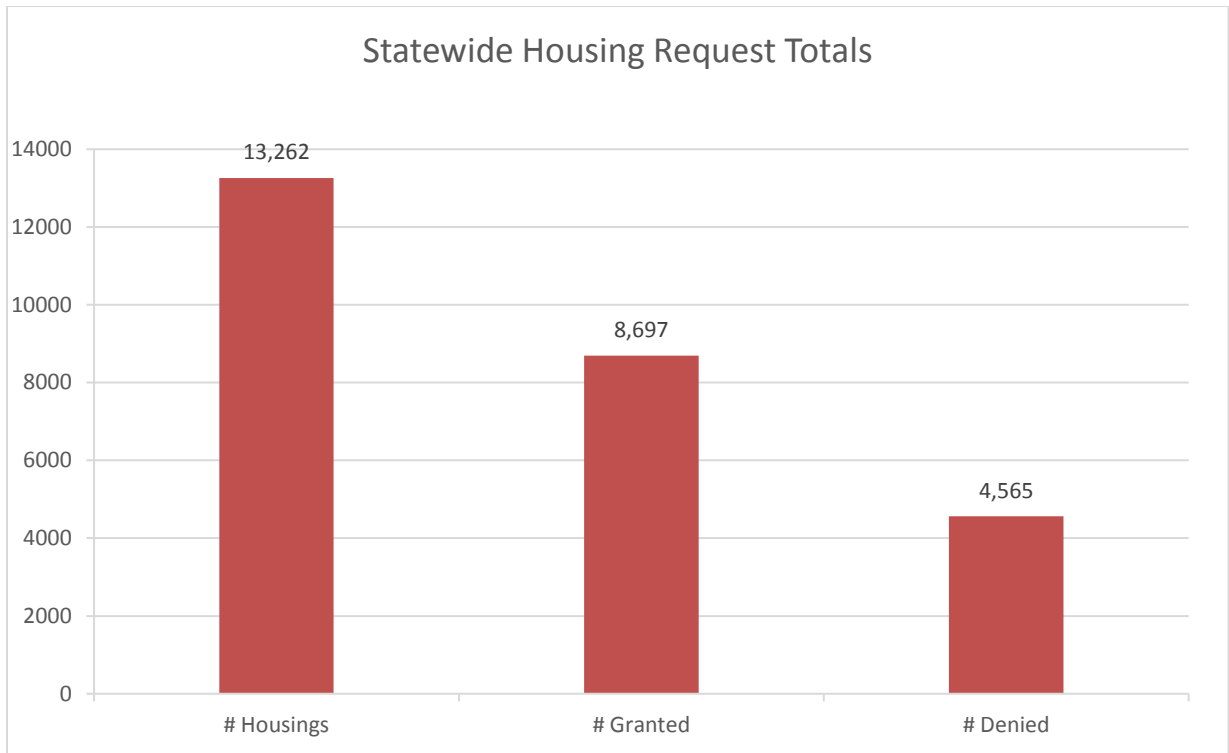
**Total Denied Applications: 4,565**

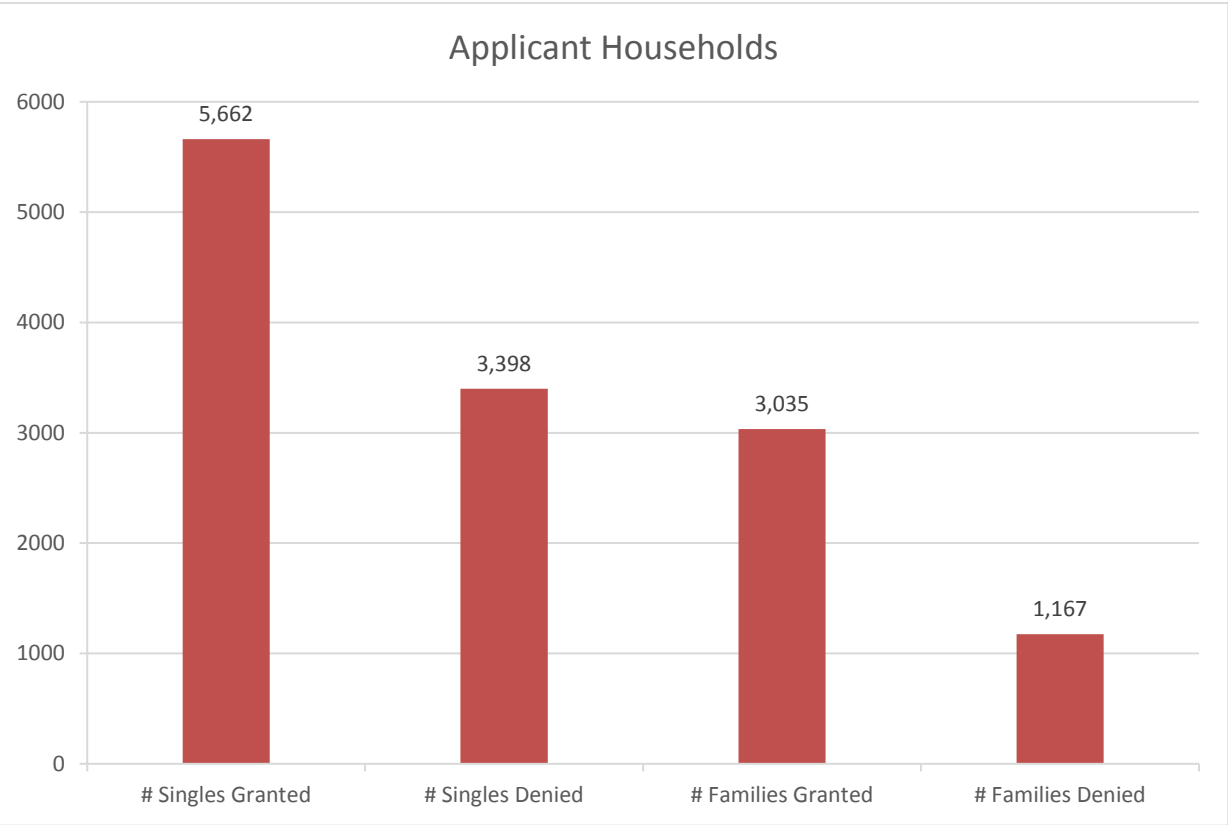
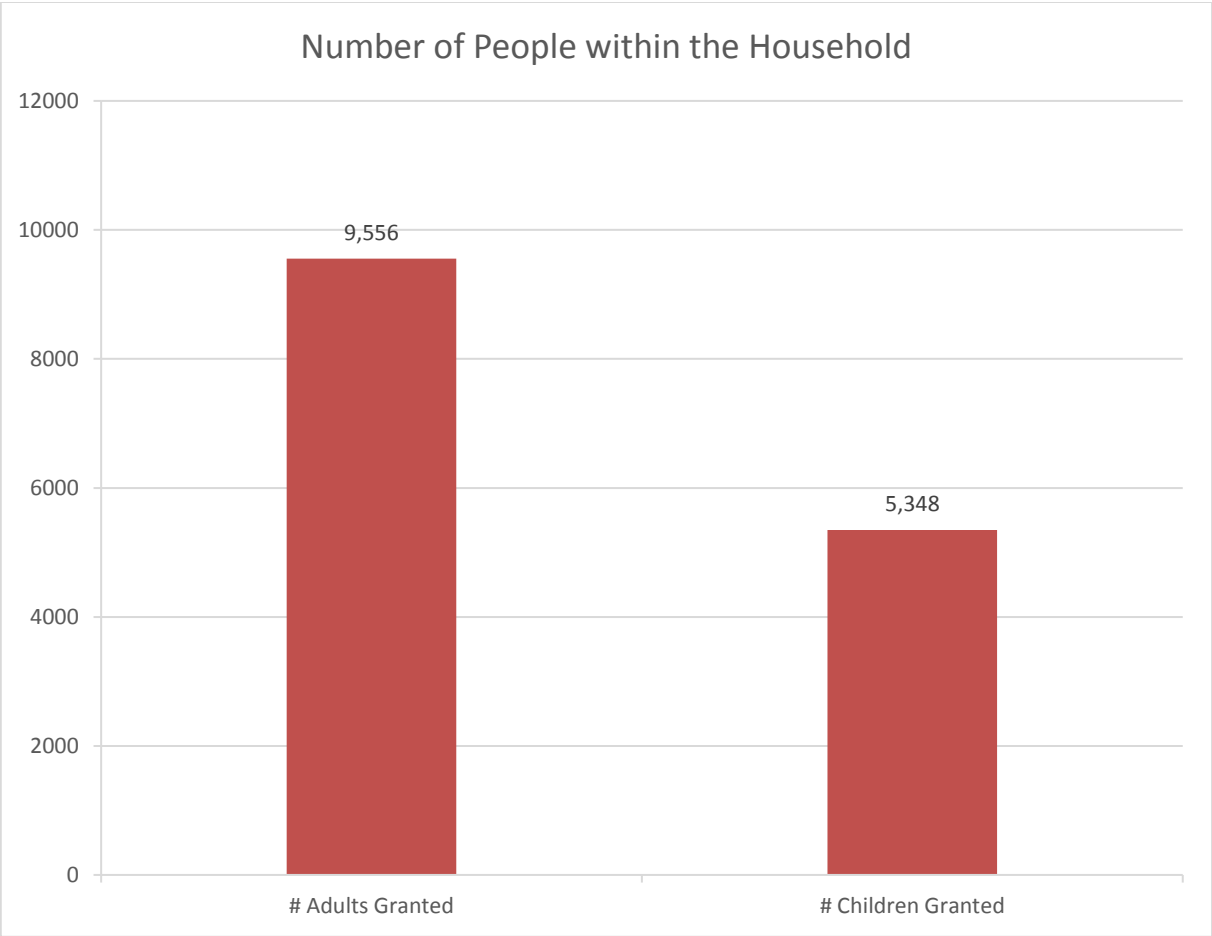
Households with Single Adults: 3,398 (74%)

Households with Child(ren): 1,167 (26%)

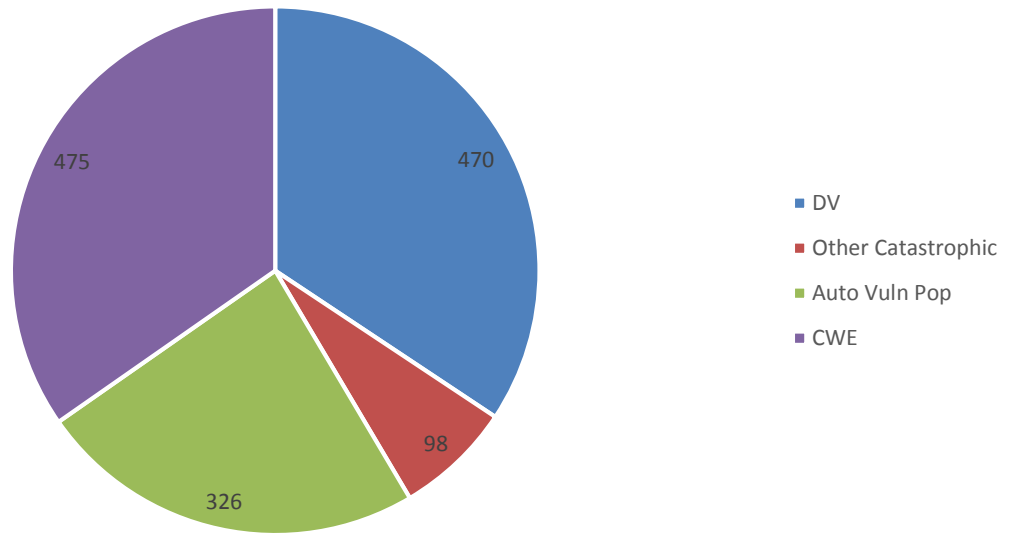
Top 5 Denial Reasons				Top 5 Denial Reasons			
1	Ineligible	1,108	33%	1	Has Other Housing Options	344	29%
2	Has Other Housing Options	1,033	30%	2	Ineligible	216	18%
3	Caused Homelessness	330	10%	3	Caused Homelessness	214	18%
4	Available Resources	239	7%	4	Available Resources	125	11%
5	No Interview	218	6%	5	Max Nights	96	8%

## APPENDIX C: GA Housing Data Tables, SFY16



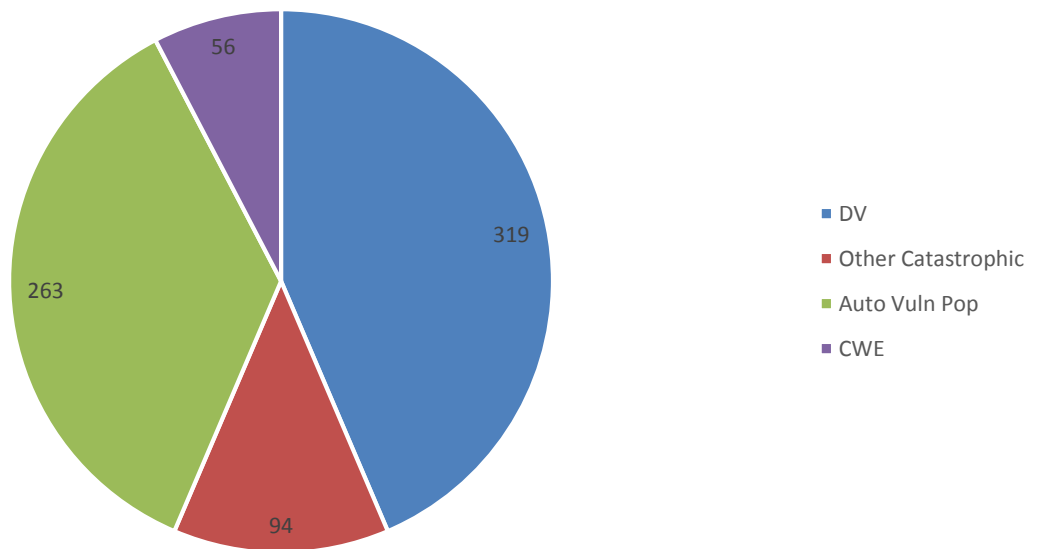


### GA/EA Temporary Housing Unduplicated Single Household Case Count



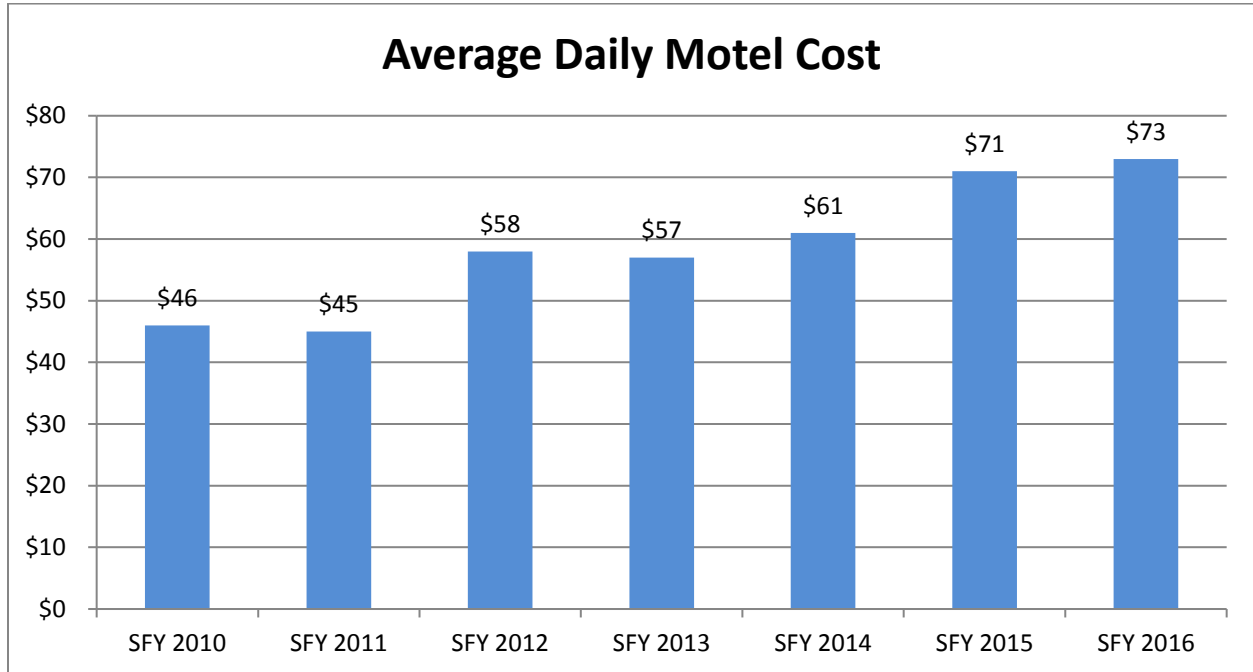
- Total Points: 3 Households
- Fair Hearing: 3 Households

### GA/EA Temporary Housing Unduplicated Family Household Case Count



- Total Points: 7 Households
- Fair Hearing: 2 Households

## APPENDIX D: GA Expenditure Data Tables, Trend



## APPENDIX E: Primary Stated Cause of Homelessness, SFY16

Primary Causes of Homelessness in Vermont	St. Albans	Burlington	Hartford	St. Johnsbury	Brattleboro	Barre	Newport	Rutland	Springfield	Bennington	Morrisville	Middlebury	Statewide	Combined districts' ranking across state in each category of homelessness
Benefit Issues (SSI, UC, CS, Voucher, St Assistance)														0
Chronic Homelessness	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	3	1	1	2	2	1	13
Could not afford housing			3	5			3	5		4				5
Domestic Violence/Child Abuse	3	2	2	3	3	3	4	1	3	3	3	1	2	13
Eviction with Cause	5	4	5	4	5	4	5				5		4	8
Eviction without Cause/Non-renewal	4	5			4	5		4	4	5	4	4	5	10
Job Loss/Unemployment/Underemployment									5					1
Kicked out of Family/Friends	1	3	4	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	1	3	3	13
Overcrowded/Underhoused														0
Unexpected Expenses (car repair)												5		1
<b>STATEWIDE - Top Five Stated Causes of Homelessness for persons applying for GA Temporary Housing</b>														
Chronic Homelessness	1													
Domestic Violence/Child Abuse	2													
Kicked out of Family/Friends	3													
Eviction with Cause	4													
Eviction without Cause/Non-renewal	5													