
Report to
The Vermont Legislature

GENERAL ASSISTANCE EMERGENCY HOUSING REPORTS

In Accordance with 2017 Act 85, Sec E.321.2

An act relating to making appropriations for the support of government

and 33 V.S.A. § 2115

Submitted to: House Committee on Appropriations
House Committee on General, Housing and Military
House Human Services
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Senate Committee on Health and Welfare
Joint Fiscal Committee

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Report Date: September 1, 2017



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Executive Summary

The Economic Services Division's General Assistance Program is established through 33 V.S.A. §2103 and provides, "Consistent with available appropriations, the Department for Children and Families shall furnish General Assistance under this chapter, except as provided below, to any otherwise eligible individual unable to provide for the necessities of life for the individual and for those whom he or she is legally obligated to support."

As a part of the 2017 Appropriations Act (H.518) (which was codified in 33 V.S.A. §2115), the General Assembly directed the Department for Children and Families (DCF) to report on the General Assistance Program on or before September 1 of each year to the Joint Fiscal Committee; the House Committees on Appropriations, on General, Housing and Military Affairs, and on Human Services; and the Senate Committees on Appropriations and on Health and Welfare. The report shall contain the following:

- (1) *an evaluation of the General Assistance program during the previous fiscal year;*
- (2) *any recommendations for changes to the program;*
- (3) *a plan for continued implementation of the program;*
- (4) *statewide statistics using deidentified data related to the use of emergency housing vouchers during the preceding State fiscal year, including demographic information, client data, shelter and motel usage rates, clients' primary stated cause of homelessness, average lengths of stay in emergency housing by demographic group and by type of housing; and*
- (5) *other information the Commissioner deems appropriate.*

Below and 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. Emergency housing has three primary paths for eligibility:

- **Catastrophic** - experiencing homelessness resulting from flood, fire, natural disaster, constructive eviction, court-ordered eviction, and experiencing domestic violence.
- **Vulnerable** – experiencing homelessness and having a child under six (6), being over the age of sixty-five (65), being in receipt of Social Security disability benefits, or being in the third trimester of pregnancy
- **Cold Weather Exception (CWE)** – self-identified as being without shelter when the ambient air temperature or windchill overnight is predicted to be less than 20 degrees Fahrenheit or the temperature is predicted to be less than 32 degrees Fahrenheit with a greater than 50% chance of precipitation.

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 serve 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. They are then 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. Each morning, ESD staff contact 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 shelter.

Alternatives to Motel Vouchers and GA Community Investments

With a high level of coordination and communication between Economic Services and local shelters (partial-year warming and year-round), ESD seeks to manage the number of motel vouchers issued by accessing local resources which offer alternatives to motels. This coordination and communication helps reduce cost and offer enhanced services to homeless families and individuals. It also ensures that placement in motels without supports or services is a last resort. ESD policy is to refer to clients to shelter first and then arrange motel accommodations in cases where there is no local shelter space available. Prioritization of emergency housing referrals for persons experiencing homelessness in Chittenden County is currently to shelter first, then Harbor Place, and then motel. In other regions, family, individual, and warming shelters continue to play a significant role in providing bed capacity and options within the local homeless Continuum of Care.

Current program resources include:

I. *Harbor Place:*

On November 1, 2013, the Harbor Place transitional program (Harbor Place) began sheltering and serving its first households. The facility was opened under the management of Champlain Housing Trust with significant financial investment from DCF. These funds supported renovating 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), Steps to End Domestic Violence, 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. Establishment and utilization of Harbor Place has also opened the door for other community partners such as UVM Medical Center as a safe option for discharge and other communities around the state to explore similar arrangements.

Aside from the services Harbor Place provides ESD clients and partners, it has been an extremely cost-effective model. 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 \$78 per night. Given Burlington's stature as a population center in the state, this

reduced rate contributes toward mitigating the overall spend for emergency housing out of the Burlington District Office. For FY17, a total of 9,536 contracted nights at Harbor Place were granted. During the months of November through April, 581 nights of emergency housing were granted under CWE at Harbor Place. Moreover, Harbor Place has received awards and recognition, both local and national, for being an effective community-based strategy to address homelessness.

II. GA Funded Community Based Investment – Alternatives to Motel Vouchers:

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, and 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 were 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 were expected to meet DCF shelter standards as well as form close referral partnerships with the local Economic Services Division.

In FY17, there were fifteen (15) GA Community Investments across the state. The alternatives to motels ranged from seasonal warming shelters to emergency housing apartments and motel pools with case management for survivors of domestic violence. Of note are the GA Community Investments operated by three domestic violence organizations. Utilizing a block grant model and working closely with the local ESD district office, these organizations manage a pool of funds for motel stays and serve all victims of domestic violence who are eligible for GA. These initiatives proved particularly successful as they decreased the average length of stay in motels from 84 nights to approximately 22 nights. This substantial decrease provided cost savings – and more importantly provides a better service to clients through an immediate connection to case management services.

III. Warming Shelters:

With AHS and DCF support, several communities set up local warming shelters for homeless individuals to have a warm and safe place to sleep. In total, DCF currently supports eight warming shelters located in Middlebury*, Springfield*, Brattleboro, Bellows Falls* area, Hartford, Barre, Burlington, and St. Johnsbury. Included in these resources is the 35-bed, behavior-based warming shelter in Burlington operated by Safe Harbor (a program of the Community Health Centers of Burlington) and funded as a GA Community Investment.

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

** These programs are not exclusively funded with GA funds.*

Evaluation of the GA Emergency Housing Program

(1) *an evaluation of the General Assistance program during the previous fiscal year;*

The GA emergency housing program has continued to face challenges regarding utilization and spending. The continued pressures on capacity and resources indicate that homelessness continues to be a significant problem in Vermont. The Point-In-Time (PIT) count data for 2017 showed an increasing incidence of homelessness outside of Chittenden County. Additionally, both domestic violence and disability continue to be leading categories through which applicants are deemed eligible for temporary housing through ESD. Over the past two years we have seen an overall upwards trend in the number of unduplicated households served through the GA emergency housing program.

GA Temp Housing	FY 2016	FY 2017
# Applications	13,262	15,084
# Applications Granted	8,697	10,082
Unduplicated Utilization	2,117	2,289

The unpredictability of weather makes budgeting an extremely challenging exercise. This past winter was colder than the previous, and, consequently, more nights qualified under the Cold Weather Exception (CWE). This manifested as a dramatic increase in spending under CWE, almost doubling from approximately \$344,00 in FY16 to approximately \$674,000 for FY17.

Of particular concern in FY17 were the continued increases in utilization and spending in the Barre and Rutland District Offices. Numbers of unduplicated households served in the Barre District Office increased from 233 in FY16 to 309 in FY17. Numbers of unduplicated households served in the Rutland District Office increased from 450 in FY16 to 491 in FY17. It's worth noting that the Rutland County Women's Network has now begun to realize savings through their strong coordination and case management efforts as well as their successful negotiations with area motels for a low rate. Despite these gains, there was still an increase in the overall spending and utilization in Rutland.

As such, the legislature directed DCF to work with the Rutland and Barre districts to assist those communities with siting seasonal warming shelters. A total of \$600,000 was appropriated to support this effort. During the summer, DCF has been meeting with stakeholders and providers in both communities to follow the Legislature's directive to identify and stand up additional shelter capacity in preparation for the coming winter. A report will be submitted to the Joint Fiscal Committee on or before September 15th with a more detailed update.

(2) *any recommendations for changes;*

The DCF Housing Team has noted demonstrable success for the sister agencies in Brattleboro, Bennington, and Rutland who have worked with ESD to take over and manage DV motel pools. ESD will continue to work

with other domestic violence organizations across the state to identify similarly effective ways to decrease survivors' reliance on motels while increasing their access to case management and services.

The GA Program is now 40 years old. Over the past 18 months, we have been examining in depth the benefits, process, and procedures of the program. ESD is analyzing potential modifications to GA rules and a possible program restructuring to better serve Vermonters and create an easier program for ESD to administer. Simultaneously, this offers an opportunity to identify how the GA program could be more cost effective and efficient. ESD has undertaken this task with diligence and in the spirit of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) embraced by ESD. We anticipate continuing this work to ascertain how ESD can provide a better service for the Vermonters we seek to help as well as a simpler program for staff to administer.

(3) plan for continued implementation

ESD will continue to operate the GA program in accordance with current rules and procedures. Recognizing that we can always do better, the Department will continue to look for ways to expand GA Community Investments, leverage the experience and resources of community partners, and ensure that the GA program provides a critical social safety net as the program of last resort.

Emergency Housing 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 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 data described above 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 and Families' Business Office generates a monthly report reflecting all payments made for emergency housing.

Statistics and Data

The expedited vulnerable population rules for emergency housing in effect July 1, 2013 were adopted as final effective March 28, 2015. A summary of emergency housing requests, including catastrophic and vulnerable populations, for the period of July 2016 to June 2017 follows:

- **15,084** emergency housing applications were received, of these:
 - **10,082** were granted; **5,002** were denied.
 - **7,301** singles were granted; **3,856** singles were denied.
 - **2,781** families were granted; **1,145** families were denied.
 - Of the **17,015** adults in households requesting emergency housing; **11,428** were granted.
 - Of the **6,983** children in households requesting emergency housing; **4,928** were granted.
 - **2,712** applications were found eligible under the catastrophic criteria.
 - **1,762** applications were found eligible under the vulnerable population criteria.
 - **37** applications were found eligible under vulnerable points (see eligibility criteria).

38,378 bed nights were paid for at an average cost of **\$73.79/night**.

9,504 bed nights were contracted through Harbor Place.

Cold Weather Exception

The following data reflects the Cold Weather Exception (CWE) nights for FY17. The first CWE night for this period occurred on November 11. There was a total of 108 CWE nights during the fiscal year – 63 were due to temperatures less than 20 degrees Fahrenheit, 102 days due to wind chill readings lower than 20 degrees Fahrenheit, and 31 days due to a chance of precipitation greater than 50% with a temperature less than 32 degrees Fahrenheit. This represents an increase from FY16 which only saw a total of 96 days. Over 50% of approved applications for emergency housing were done so under CWE, amounting to an estimated total spending of \$671,567.

Conclusion

This report demonstrates that the Department successfully deployed emergency housing benefits to meet the need in FY17. However, as has been the case in previous reports, the need and cost for emergency housing continues to increase beyond our alternative measures.

Our State and community partners have acknowledged that, while motels may meet the need for a temporary roof overhead, it is not good public policy for reducing homelessness in Vermont. The work to identify and analyze community needs; inventory local resources; develop the needed infrastructure to streamline access to housing help; and spur community-based alternatives to motels continues. As more GA Community investments come online, existing projects continue to build their capacity and streamline

systems. Despite some of the fiscal challenges associated with shifting models, ESD will continue to identify ways in which we can leverage the resources and expertise in local continua of care to provide better and more cost effective assistance to vulnerable Vermonters. Likewise, ESD continues to work with other partners within the Agency of Human Services to limit duplication of services and more effectively administer our programs as part of the system of care.

We continue to assert that this approach creates a more effective, efficient emergency housing program within the range of AHS initiatives to prevent and alleviate homelessness.

APPENDIX A: Aggregate GA Housing (July 2016 – June 2017)

Total # Housing Requests	15,084
# of Housing Requests Granted	10,082
# of Housing Requests Denied	5,002
# Singles Granted Housing	7,301
# Singles Denied Housing	3,856
# Families Granted Housing	2,781
# Families Denied Housing	1,145
# of Adults Granted	11,428
# of Children Granted	4,928
Catastrophic Granted	2,712
Auto. Vulnerable Granted	1,762
Points Vulnerable Granted	37
Total # of Uncontracted Nights Granted Under Catastrophic and Vulnerable	29,242
Average Cost per Night	\$73.79
Estimated Total Costs	\$2,157,796.88
CWE	5,565
# Adults	6,241
# Children	1,409
Total # of Uncontracted Nights Granted Under CWE	9,136
Average Cost Per Night	\$73.51
Estimated Total Costs	\$671,567.48

- Total # of Harbor Place Nights: 9,536
- Total # of CWE Harbor Place Nights: 581
- “Uncontracted nights” denote those exclusive of the Harbor Place contract

APPENDIX B: GA Housing Denial Data (July 2016 - June 2017)

July 2016 - June 2017 GA/EA Denials

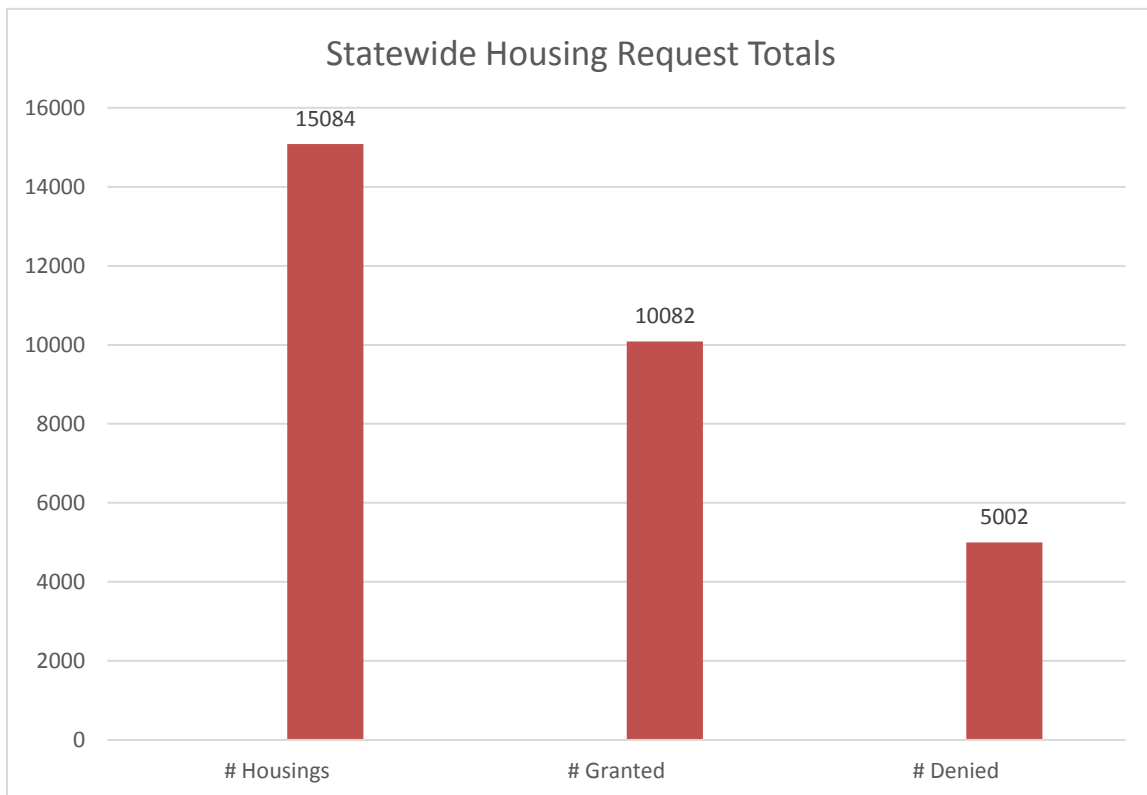
Total Denied Applications

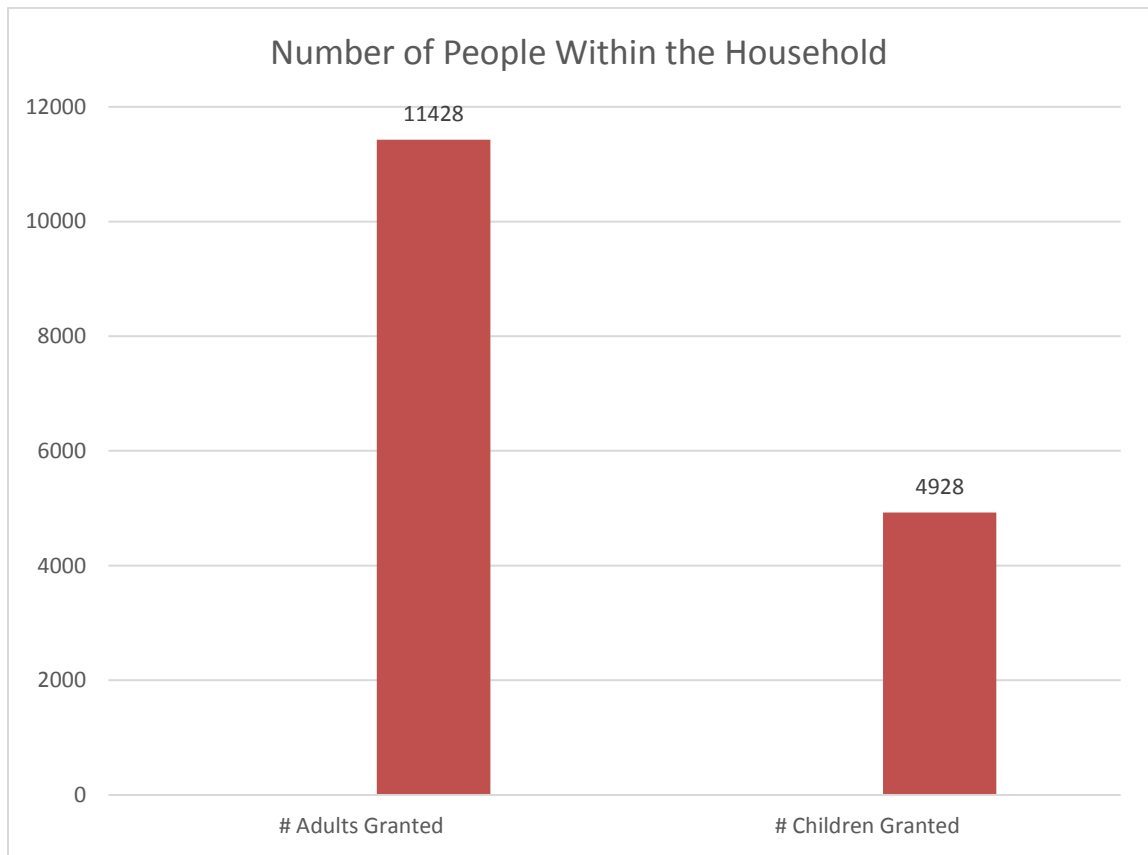
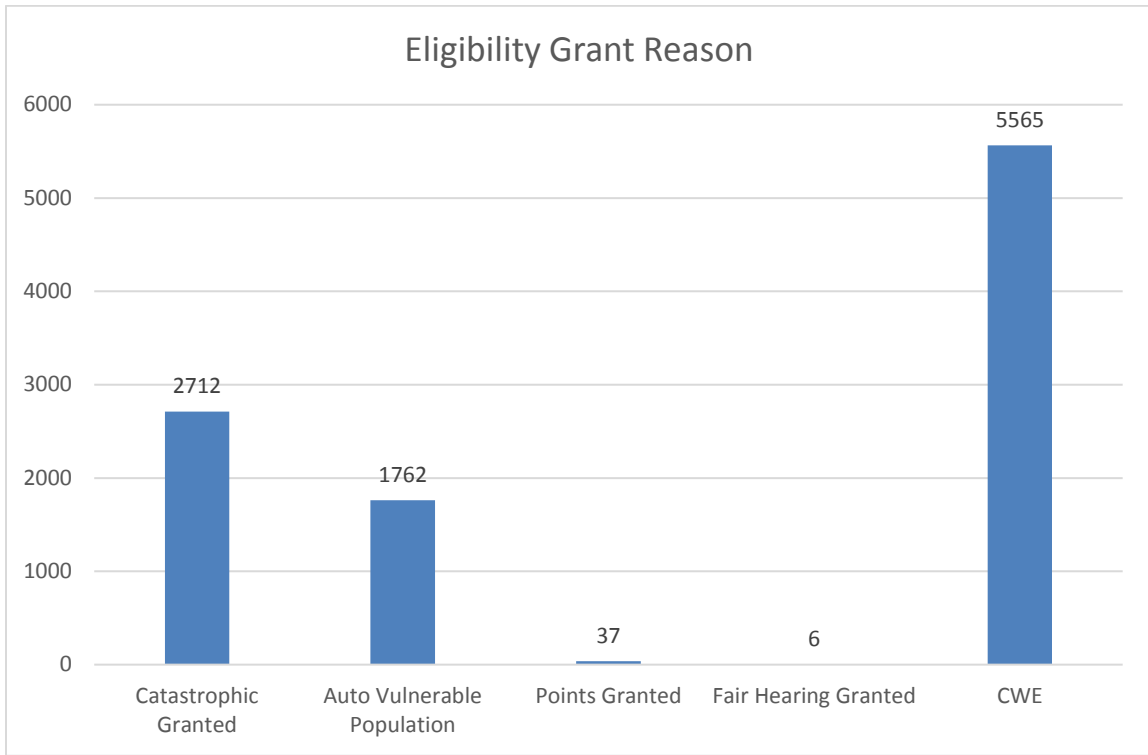
5,002

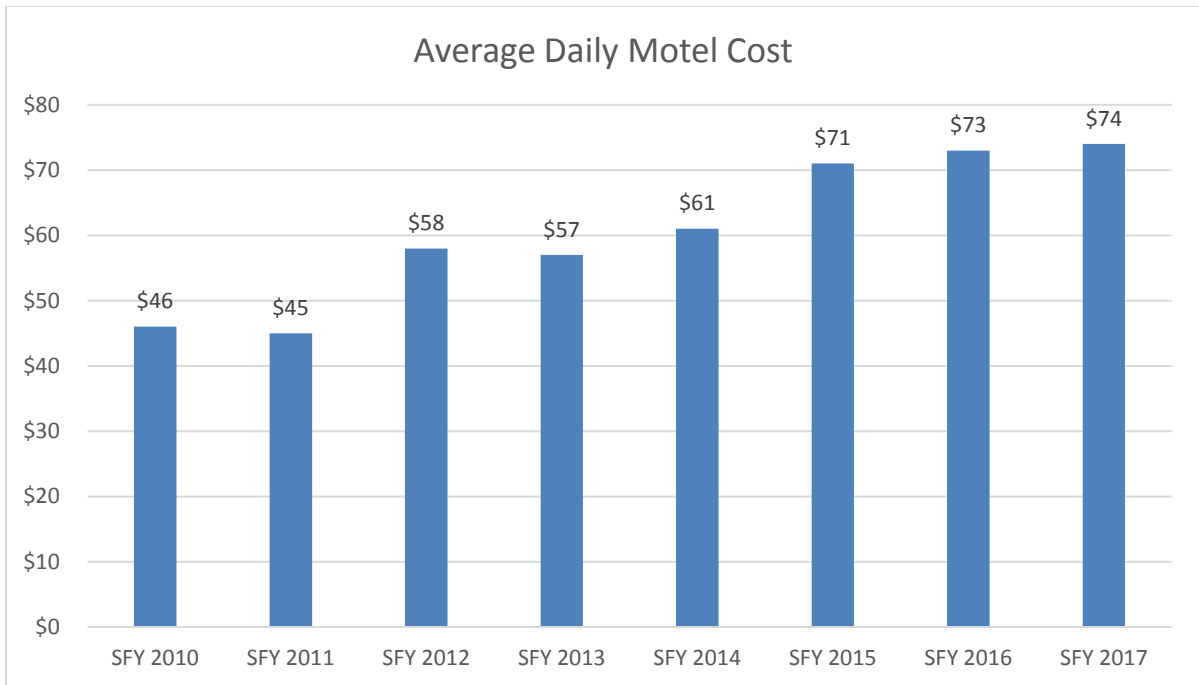
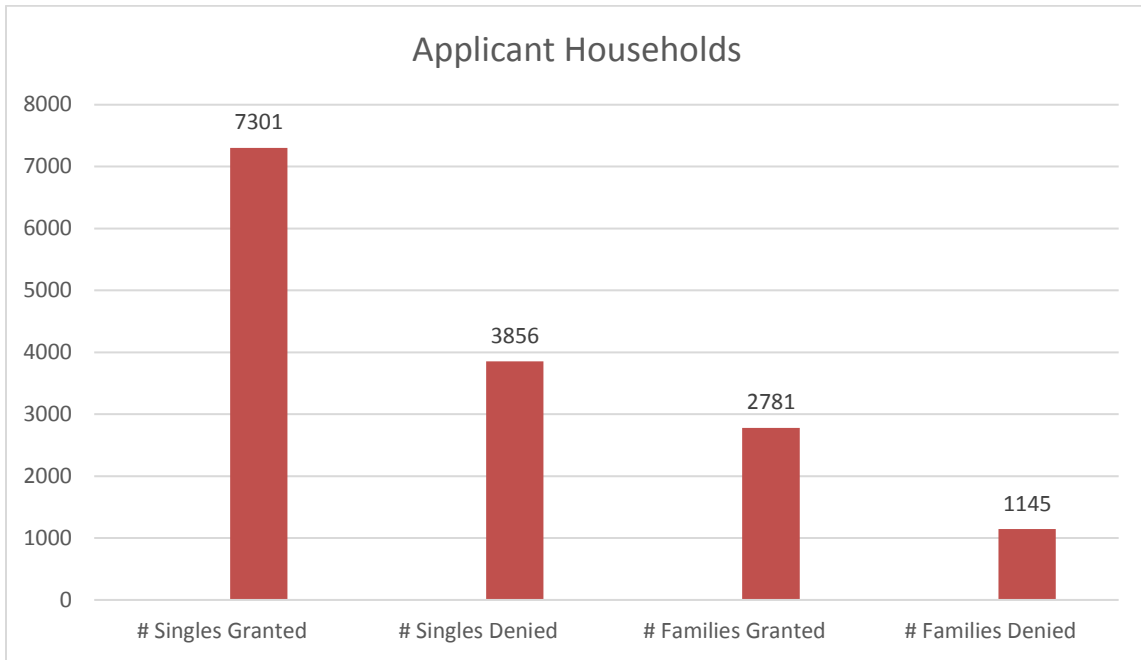
Households with Adults ONLY				Households with Child(ren)			
		3,860	77%			1,142	23%
Top 5 Denial Reasons				Top 5 Denial Reasons			
1	Ineligible	1,373	36%	1	Has Other Housing Options	358	31%
2	Has Other Housing Options	1,098	28%	2	Caused Own Homelessness	235	21%
3	Caused Own Homelessness	355	9%	3	Ineligible	203	18%
4	No Interview	246	6%	4	Max Nights	95	8%
5	Available Resources	231	6%	5	Available Resources	89	8%

APPENDIX C: GA Housing Data Tables (Statewide: July 2016 – June 2017)

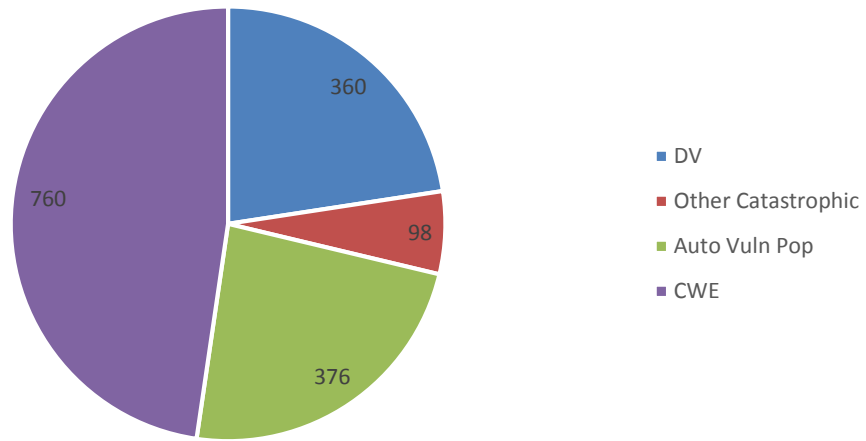
Statewide Temporary Housing Data for July 2016 – June 2017





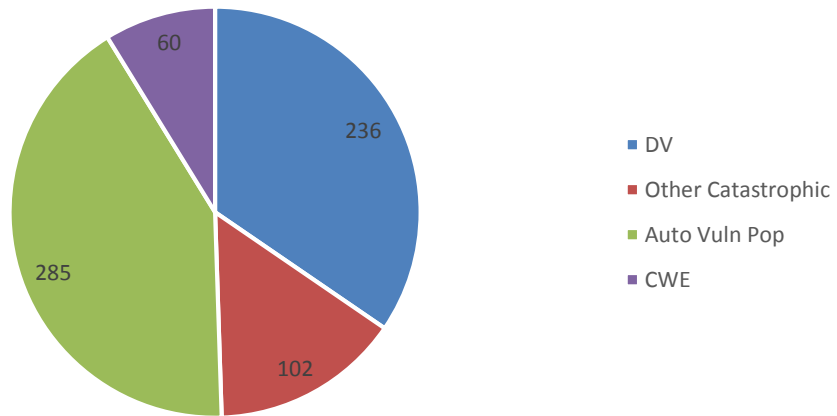


GA/EA Temporary Housing Unduplicated Single Household Case Count



- Total Points: 1 Household
- Fair Hearing: 0 Households

GA/EA Temporary Housing Unduplicated Family Household Case Count



- Total Points: 11 Households
- Fair Hearing: 0 Households

