

MEMO

TO: House Committee on Appropriations, Chair, Martha Heath

FROM: Commissioner Dave Yacovone

DATE: January 15, 2014

RE: **General Assistance Housing 2014 BAA Request**

The Department for Children and Families received a number of questions from your committee related to the General Assistance Temporary Housing Program. Below is our best thinking and relevant data we were able to gather in the time since those questions were received.

1. *How many of the people who receive motel vouchers have no financial resources to contribute towards the required 50% of available income?*

DCF conducted a manual, randomly selected review of 100 Burlington District Office files of GA housing grantees for the five month period August through December 2013. The research revealed the following:

Of the 100 cases:

- 64% had income
- 36% had no income

Of the 64% that had income:

- Reach Up (or RU with other income) – 28% (18)
- SSI, SSA or combination – 46% (29)
- Job Income – 11% (7)
- Unemployment – 6% (4)
- General Assistance – 9% (6)

2. *If we were to move the 50% required payment into escrow to help clients retain permanent housing what would it cost the state?*

The Department needs more time to assess the feasibility and practicality of this option.

3. A. Regarding the current process requiring an emergency hearing that often comes late in the day, prior to receiving a motel voucher, should we house people for one night and then have the hearing the next day?

Granting one night and scheduling the hearing the following day in all circumstances would not be an ideal solution. First, there is concern about the possible precedential impact against the Department of granting an additional night of housing when the Department's position is that there is no eligibility.

Second, and more problematic, one of the main problems with the expedited process is the volume of expedited requests. A policy that would grant one night automatically upon request of a hearing could lead to more requests for hearings just to get the one guaranteed night. Also, not every expedited hearing request results in housing, thus, granting one night automatically could also result in housing applicants for one night who would not otherwise be housed.

B. Are there any other suggestions about the hearing officer process?

The Department needs to engage stakeholders as it moves toward filing the permanent rules. We will consider all aspects of the appeals process with a goal of increasing clarity, including the expedited appeal process.

One change the Legislature could make is to align the GA program appeal process with that of other Department benefit programs. Specifically, you could change the statute to give the Secretary of the Agency of Human Services the authority to reverse Human Services Board decisions on General Assistance appeals in the same manner as TANF or Medicaid appeals, 3 V.S.A. § 3091(h)(1) and (2).

4. How much of the appropriation that was passed in Act 50, the budget for General Assistance has been spent to date?

- A. Regarding the total General Assistance program budget, between July 1 and December 31, 2013 DCF paid out **\$5,196,146**.
- B. As of December 31, 2013, DCF paid out **\$1,475,169** for General Assistance temporary housing.

These figures do not reflect most expenses for the month of December as invoices tend to lag about a month after the expense was incurred. It is safe to say as of January 15, 2014, the \$1.5M GA housing budget is overspent.

5. After a person has exhausted their 28 days in a motel how long is it until they can come back and ask for more motel stays?

One year - An applicant is eligible under the vulnerable population rules for 28 days of housing within a twelve-month period. Cold weather exception is the only reason within that one year time frame families can get additional emergency housing under GA.

6. How did DCF arrive at the \$3.2 million adjustment that is in the Budget Adjustment? Could the committee get a full accounting of the \$3.2 million?

See attached document titled: **14 DCF GA Budget_BAA Estimate.

7. What would happen if we added \$1.6 million in the BAA rather than the requested \$3.2 million? What policy changes would have to be made?

The Department would request that the Legislature put in the BAA language new eligibility criteria to be applied for the rest of this year so that the changes could go into effect immediately. If the legislature puts this budgetary restriction in place without clear guidance to the Department about how to meet the budget target, the Department would immediately engage stakeholders to get their best thinking about how to restrict the program for the remainder of the fiscal year.

8. What would happen if we said “No more motel vouchers for other than catastrophic situations?”

From August 1 to December 31, 2013, DCF granted **3,611** temporary housing applications. Of that total, **1,008, or 28%** of the total grants made, were for catastrophic circumstances. In other words, **72%** (or **2,603**) of the households granted temporary housing under current rules were granted “for other than catastrophic situations.”

This decision would mean many – almost three-quarters – of the households currently eligible for GA temporary housing would become ineligible. **73%** (**2,627** households) of all temporary housing grants have been for single person households. Only **27%** of grants have gone to families with children. **1,778 children** were in households that have already been denied GA housing in this fiscal year.

9. What is the department’s experience with more permanent housing solutions? How many people have been permanently housed?

The Department believes its investments in upstream and rapid rehousing services are paying dividends. Since inception the Vermont Rental Subsidy program has transitioned 123 low-income households, consisting of 377 persons, from homelessness to affordable housing.

The midyear 2014 Community Housing Grants report data tell us that 132 households that were at risk of homelessness have had their housing stabilized within 28 days. 172 households that were homeless have been rehoused within 28 days and 66 of those households remain stably housed at 90 days.

While it is too early to have performance and outcome data for Harbor Place (HP), where services started on Nov. 1, 2013, the Department is optimistic that GA households who are served there will be more successful (than others not receiving this service) avoiding additional experiences of homelessness. On site case management services are an important program enhancement. We will know more definitively in a few months if this service is yielding positive results.

The Department also initiated a \$400,000 Family Supported Housing demonstration project in three communities – Burlington, Rutland and Brattleboro. While services are now fully in place in those communities, it is too early to tell how significantly these intensive and comprehensive case management services for homeless families, and families at risk of homelessness, are bending the curve. This initiative was modeled after proven successful national models and the Department looks forward to sharing program performance and outcome data in the next budget season.

10. *If people are not being put up in hotels, where are they?*

If they are found ineligible for temporary housing, we do not track where they go. We make referrals to community action agencies and other community supports, such as warming shelters, churches and parent child centers.

11. *What is the churn rate for homeless people coming in and out of motels?*

****See the attached document titled: *GA Temp Housing 2009-2013 recurrence data.***

12. *Could you please give the committee a list the places that clients go to apply for motel vouchers?*

Clients apply for temporary housing at the twelve Economic Services Division offices located throughout the state Monday through Friday. Vermont 2-1-1 covers for ESD after hours and weekends.

13. *Is there a maximum number of days a person can access obtaining vouchers in a year's time?*

Under the catastrophic criteria households can receive up to 84 days within a twelve-month period. Those determined eligible under the vulnerable

population criteria can receive 28 days within a twelve-month period. The cold weather exception (CWE) overrides these eligibility criteria.

14. Is there waiting period after having used a 28 day voucher before a new application is filed?

An applicant can submit an application at anytime, however, they are only eligible for 28 days in a twelve-month period under the vulnerable population criteria

15. Is their last place of residence identified and checked?

When we interview we ask where they have been living or where they stayed the night before and why they can no longer stay there.

If they respond that they were staying with their mother, other family, a friend, etc., the worker asks their permission to call and confirm that they can no longer stay there. If they claim that they were renting an apartment and needed to leave, we ask permission to call the landlord and confirm why they had to leave to determine good cause/no good cause for loss of housing. If it is being claimed a court-ordered eviction or constructive eviction that would have required paperwork, we ask to contact the court or health officer to obtain a copy of the documentation. If it is a DV victim, we ask for a letter from the sister agency stating that they are currently engaged with them.

16. How many instances/how often are worker decisions overridden by supervisors?

Eligibility workers are determining eligibility based on the GA rules in place, thus managers seldom need to override an eligibility decision made by a worker. Approximately 95% of the time, managers support the decision made by a worker.

How much does the Department anticipate spending in 2014 due to the cold weather policy?

If the 2014 winter continues to be as cold as it has been for the past two months, the cost for housing people during cold weather nights will be approximately \$835,000.

Below are the CWE expenses that have been authorized for October, November and December 2013. The January through April figures are estimated based on the December experience (28 cold weather nights). These numbers include Vermont 2-1-1 as well ESD authorizations.

CWE	Oct 13	Nov 13	Dec 13	Jan 14	Feb 14	Mar 14	Apr 14	TOTAL
	\$ 1,997	\$ 50,866	\$ 152,121	\$ 152,121	\$ 152,121	\$ 152,121	\$ 76,060	\$ 737,407

In addition, we estimate that half of the monthly contracted cost for Harbor Place can be projected for CWE authorizations, for a total projected CWE cost of Harbor Place for FY14 of **\$97,131**.