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STATE OF VERMONT
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

House Committee on General, Housing and Military Affairs

To: Rep. Martha Heath and Rep. Anne O'Brien

From: Rep. Helen Head

Re: Final General Assistance budget recommendation

Date: May 8, 2013

Thank you for the opportunity to comment further on the General Assistance language in the big bill.

The Committee on General, Housing, and Military Affairs concurs with the first three sections of the bill related to the Lottery, Housing Study, and Housing Assistance Program.

The committee has concerns about the third section related to General Assistance Emergency Housing. Our concerns are particularly focused on the definition of vulnerable populations. It would appear that the agency seeks to simplify the review process and / or limit appeals by statutory adoption of very restrictive definitions. Our concerns are relieved somewhat by a more recent proposal (heard Tuesday afternoon) that would combine the catastrophic and vulnerable population funding in FY2014. And we recognize that catastrophic awards include some consideration of medical necessity. Nevertheless, we fear that the presently proposed definitions will eliminate many persons who are most in need of assistance.

Under the proposed definition of vulnerability, a determination of disability by the Social Security Administration must exist before an applicant can be considered eligible for emergency housing. It can take months, even years, before Social Security takes final favorable action on applications for disability benefits. Once a determination is made and benefits paid, applicants are often in a better position to provide for their housing (and the state can obtain reimbursement for general assistance rendered from the Social Security award). However, while waiting for a determination, applicants are often without financial resources and most in need of General Assistance housing – all while being significantly impaired. We caution against restrictions that prohibit persons who lack Social Security determinations or are temporarily disabled from receiving General Assistance benefits.

Similarly, we can envision scenarios where families with children over the age of 6 years and persons who are pregnant and in the first or second trimester are at significant health risk if they are denied General Assistance emergency housing. Also, people who are age 65 or older are not necessarily more vulnerable than those who are younger.

We recognize that heavy program use combined with budget constraints may require the agency to refocus priorities under General Assistance Emergency Housing. And, that in doing so, our statutes and the significant body of rules around the program would need to change. However, as we discussed in our recommendations before House budget passage in March, we believe it is essential that the agency provide a much more comprehensive picture of the program than it has provided to date. Significant program changes (including changes to the policy concerning housing people who have been evicted from rental housing) should wait until we hear in more detail where there are pressures on program utilization and what measures the agency has taken to more comprehensively review utilization and follow-up with participants. We would welcome an opportunity to participate in program review and would appreciate receiving that review no later than January 2014.

If revised definitions of vulnerable people are adopted, we ask that you consider adding the following language: “(2) An individual determined to be a member of a vulnerable population, other than those populations defined in subdivision (1) of this subsection, may receive emergency housing until the next business day.”