
Report to
The Vermont Legislature

GENERAL ASSISTANCE EMERGENCY HOUSING PROGRAM
BI-ANNUAL REPORT

In Accordance with 2014 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

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Executive Summary

As part of the Appropriations Act of 2014, the General Assembly included a provision directing the Commissioner of the Department for Children and Families (DCF) to develop a General Assistance program that would be used, with specific exemptions, for emergency housing in catastrophic situations; for the cold weather exemption; and for certain vulnerable populations.

The Act modified the housing assistance program to allow the Agency of Human Services flexibility when providing services through its General Assistance program. The stated goal of the program is to “mitigate poverty and serve applicants more effectively” than they were being served with the same amount of General Assistance funds prior to gaining this increased flexibility.

The Act required that the Agency develop the following systems:

- (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 (Sec. E.321.1).

The Act also required the Agency to submit bi-annual reports to the legislature containing data from the preceding six months relating to the use of emergency housing vouchers. The report must contain statistics about these specific areas:

- demographic information;
- de-identified client data;
- shelter and motel usage rates;
- clients’ primary stated cause of homelessness;
- the average lengths of stay in emergency housing by demographic group and by type of housing; and
- other relevant data as the Secretary deems appropriate (Sec. E.321.2).

As demonstrated by the data contained in this report, the Agency met the need for emergency housing this past winter and spring, although at substantial cost due to an increase in applications and need.

The causes of homelessness are complex and varied. Many households are eligible for GA emergency housing because they identify domestic violence as the cause of their homelessness¹. This report shows that the cost of meeting the need for emergency housing as it is currently run is unsustainable in the long term. The Agency is working with state and community partners to create alternative permanent solutions.

The General Assistance Housing Program Update

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

¹ Please see Appendix D on pg. 12

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, 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. 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 is working well and assures that shelters, where they exist, remain the first resource for homeless families and individuals needing emergency shelter.

Subsequent to discussions with Legal Services Law Line of Vermont and Disability Rights Vermont, the Department for Children and Families decided to pilot 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, or Vermont Legal Aid). The pilot was put into place mid-October and a memo was sent out alerting interested parties of the pilot and the availability of this scheduling option. As of June 2015, only two households have accessed this pilot through Vermont Legal Aid.

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 in securing housing. There are bi-weekly check-in calls with community partners, 2-1-1, CHT, Harbor Place and DCF Economic Services Division.

Harbor Place has been in operation 21 months. 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 \$52 per night. The following data reflect the average number of beds used per night for the contracted rooms:

- During the Cold Weather Exception (CWE) months of January, February and March, 97% of the 30 contracted rooms were used at an average cost of \$1,083 per night.
- During the months of April, May and June, 83% of the contracted rooms were used for an average cost of \$950 per night.

Note: The number of CWE nights in Burlington in the months of January, February and March 2015 were greater than the number of CWE nights in Burlington during those same months in 2014.

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 seven warming shelters located in Middlebury, Springfield, Brattleboro, Bellows Falls area, Hartford, Barre and Burlington.

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 set-up as follows: Shelter, Harbor Place, and Motel.

In other regions of the state, family, individual and warming shelters continue to play a significant role in providing bed capacity and 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 experiencing homelessness, with medical needs; require a warm, safe place during the day.

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 the assistance of 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 for the calendar year 2014.

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 the period of January to June 2015 follows:

- **15,431** emergency housing applications² were received (9,503 were received during the same period last year), of these:
 - **11,961** were granted; **3,470** were denied.
 - **9,139** singles were granted; **2,778** singles were denied.
 - **2,822** families were granted; **692** families were denied.
 - Of the **16,860** adults in households requesting emergency housing; **13,069** were granted.
 - Of the **6,164** children in households requesting emergency housing; **4,939** were granted.
 - **1,876** applications were found categorically-eligible under the catastrophic criteria; **1,742** were granted.
 - **868** applications were found categorically-eligible under the vulnerable population categories; **818** were granted.
 - **7** applications were found eligible under vulnerable points (see eligibility criteria); **7** were granted.
- **18,874** bed nights were paid for at an average cost of **\$71/night** (14,752 bed nights were paid for at an average cost of \$60/night during the same period last year).

² Please note that these are applications received total; some may be duplicative.

Cold Weather Exception

The following data reflects the Cold Weather Exception (CWE) nights for January – June 2015. There were 31 CWE nights in January; 28 CWE nights in February; 28 CWE nights in March and 6 CWE nights in April resulting in a total of 93 CWE nights through the remainder of the CWE season ending in April 23, 2015.

CWE nights in the 2015 were slightly lower (93 nights) than the same period in 2014 (99 nights). However, the number of CWE emergency housing vouchers increased from 5,079 in 2014 to 9,392 in 2015. From January 1st through April 23rd, 2015 DCF spent an estimated \$1,560,414 on cold weather exception shelter. This figure represents 22,424 nights at an average cost of \$70/night. The cost is almost double the amount spent during the same period in 2014 (\$783,017).

Conclusion

This report demonstrates that the Agency successfully utilized emergency housing vouchers to meet the need for crisis housing in 2015. However, the need for emergency housing and its cost continues to be prohibitively expensive, particularly among households with victims of domestic violence. Long-term funding for emergency housing in this manner is not sustainable. In FY14, \$3.1M was spent for GA emergency housing vouchers. In FY15, GA Emergency Housing was appropriated \$3.2M after BAA and \$4.2M was spent for emergency housing vouchers. For FY16, the appropriation for emergency housing vouchers is \$2.3M.

During the timeframe covered by this report, the Department for Children and Families Housing Team (ESD, OEO and Commissioners Office) worked with housing stakeholders to re-design the GA Emergency Housing Program to minimize use of motels. 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 in reducing homelessness in Vermont. The work is to identify and analyze local needs data; inventory local resources; develop the needed infrastructure to streamline access to housing help; and spur community-based alternatives to motels. This work began in earnest during the time period of this report, and continues to strengthen. The Team's work and progress will be reported during the FY16 Session.

APPENDIX A: Aggregate GA Housing (January – June 2015)

Total # housing only requests	# of housing only requests granted	# of housing only requests denied	# singles GRANTED housing	# singles denied housing	# families GRANTED housing	# families denied housing	# of adults GRANTED	# of children GRANTED	Catastrophic GRANTED
15,431	11,961	3,470	9,139	2,778	2,822	692	13,069	4,939	1,742
Auto. Vulnerable GRANTED	Points Vulnerable GRANTED	Total # of Nights Paid For	Average cost per night	Average Total Costs	CWE	#adults	#children	# of nights paid for	
818	7	18,874	\$71.08	1,341,609	9,392	10,055	2,819	22,424	

Potential Denial Reasons

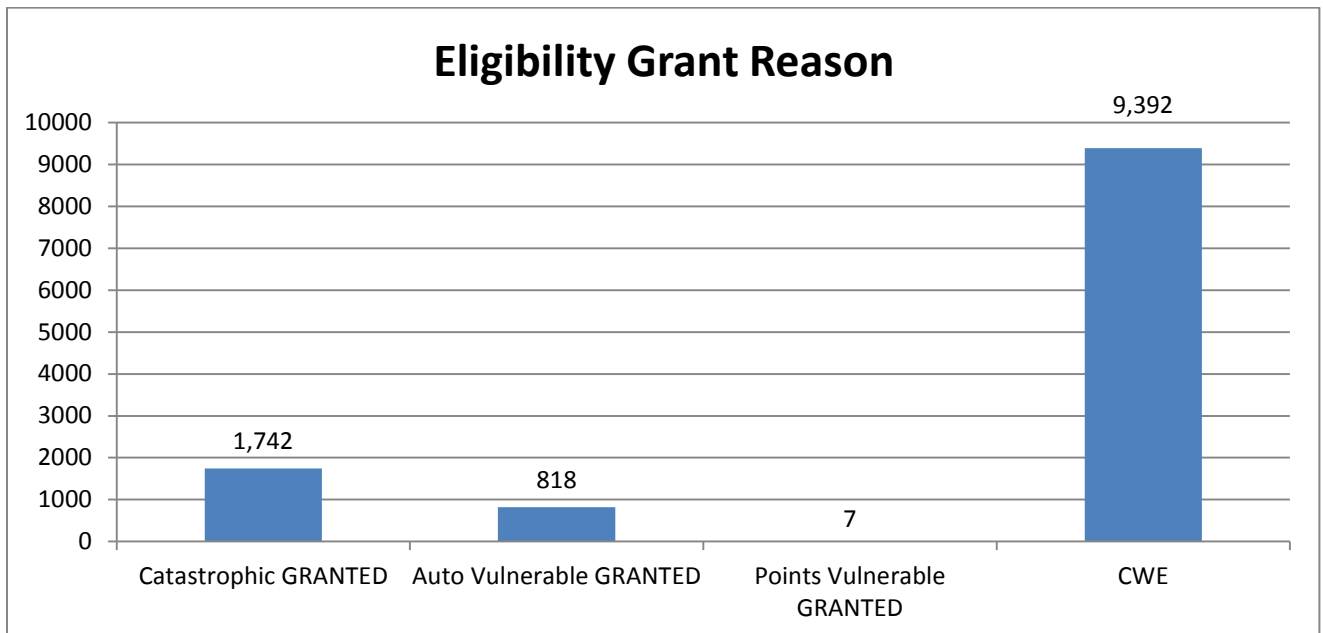
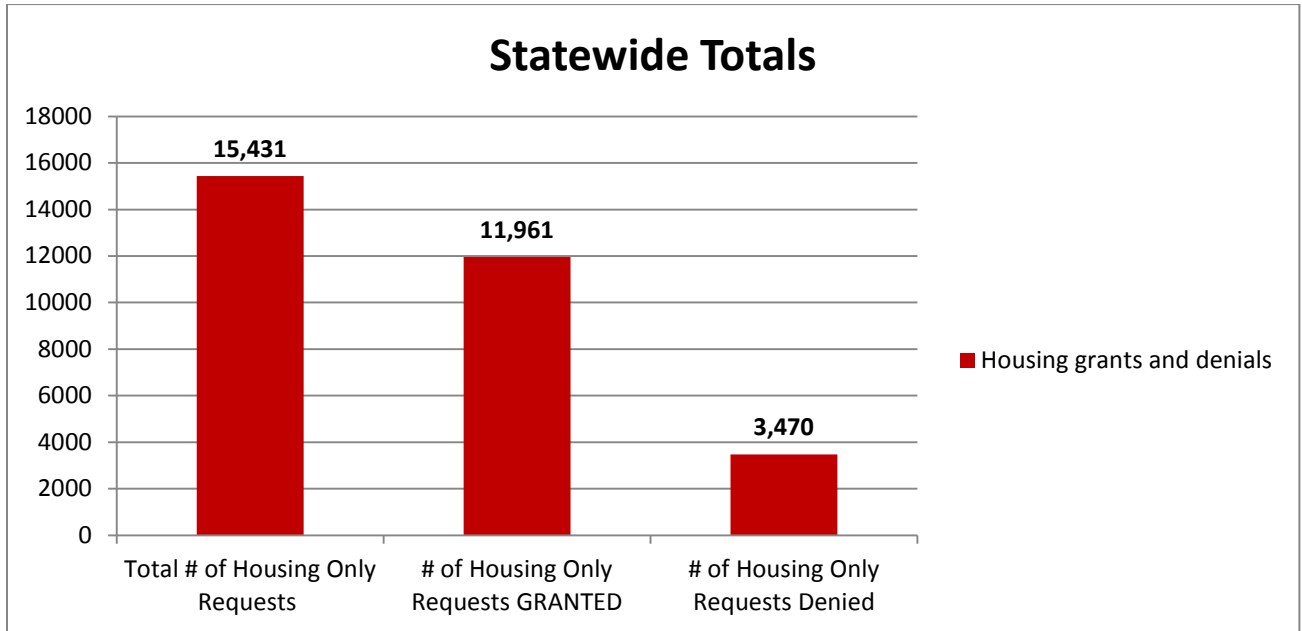
- Used Max days 28/84
- No Verification provided
- Not meeting with worker
- Not spending 30% towards meeting housing need
- Didn't follow up with Housing provider

APPENDIX B: GA Housing Denial Data (January – June 2015)

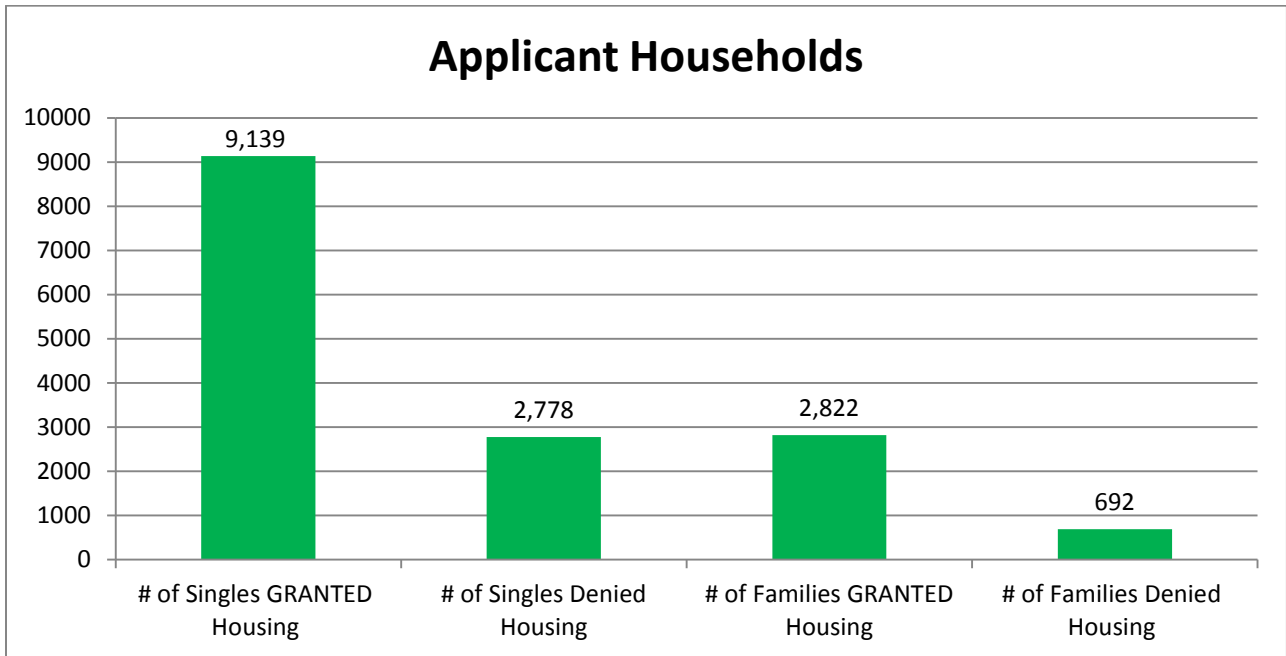
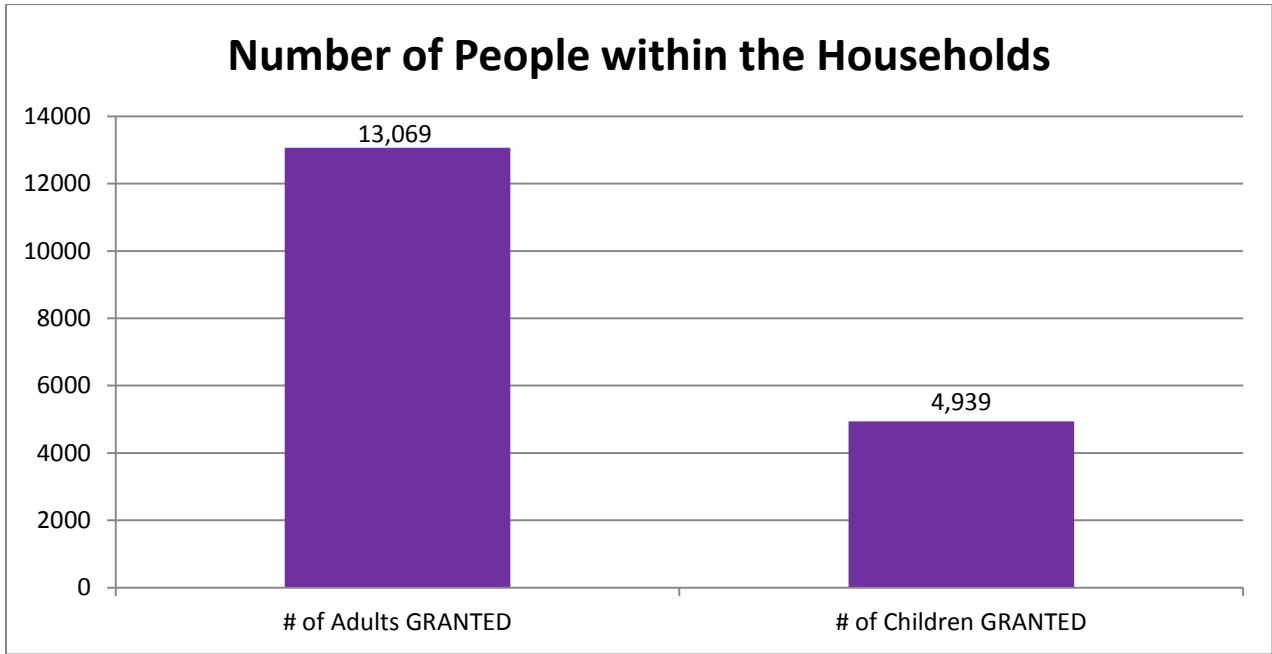
January 2015 - June 2015 G/AEA Denials							
Total Denied Applications							
3470							
Households with Adults ONLY				Households with Child(ren)			
		2778	80%			692	20%
Top 5 Denial Reasons				Top 5 Denial Reasons			
1	Has Other Housing Options	790	28%	1	Has Other Housing Options	187	27%
2	Ineligible	788	28%	2	Ineligible	113	16%
3	No Interview	415	15%	3	Available Resources	77	11%
4	Infraction	191	7%	4	Caused Homelessness	54	8%
5	Available Resources	154	6%	5	Max Nights	46	7%

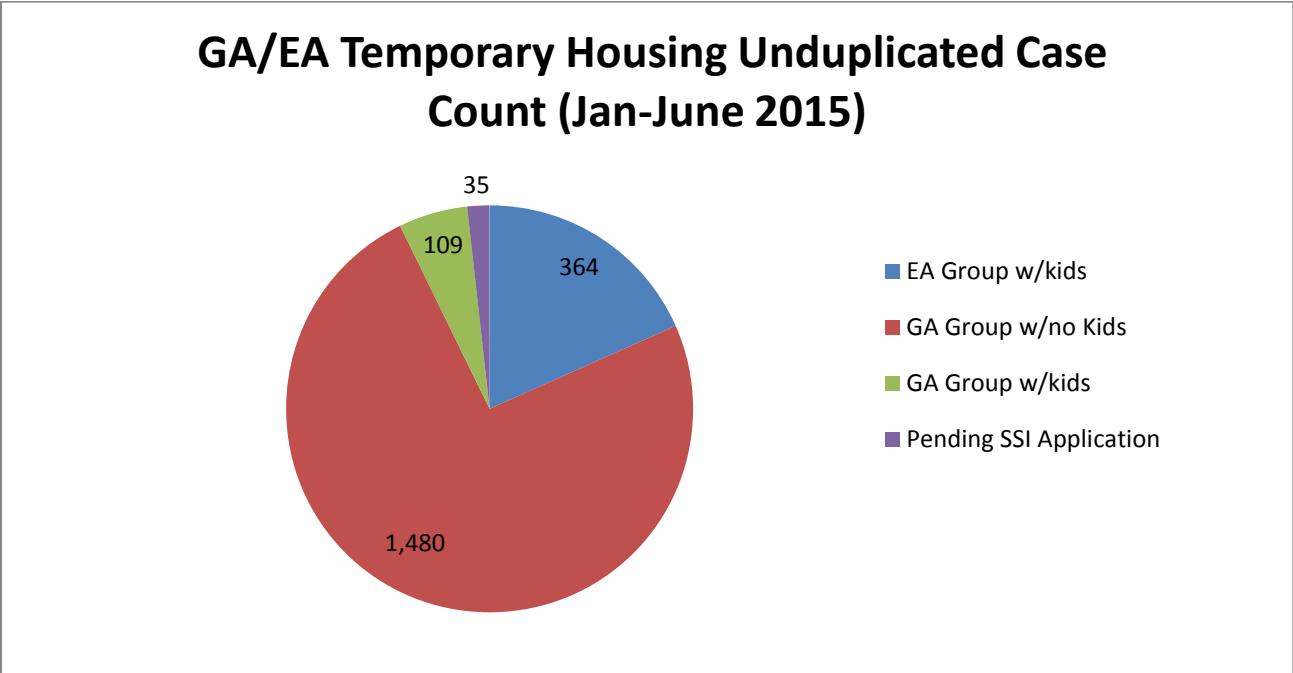
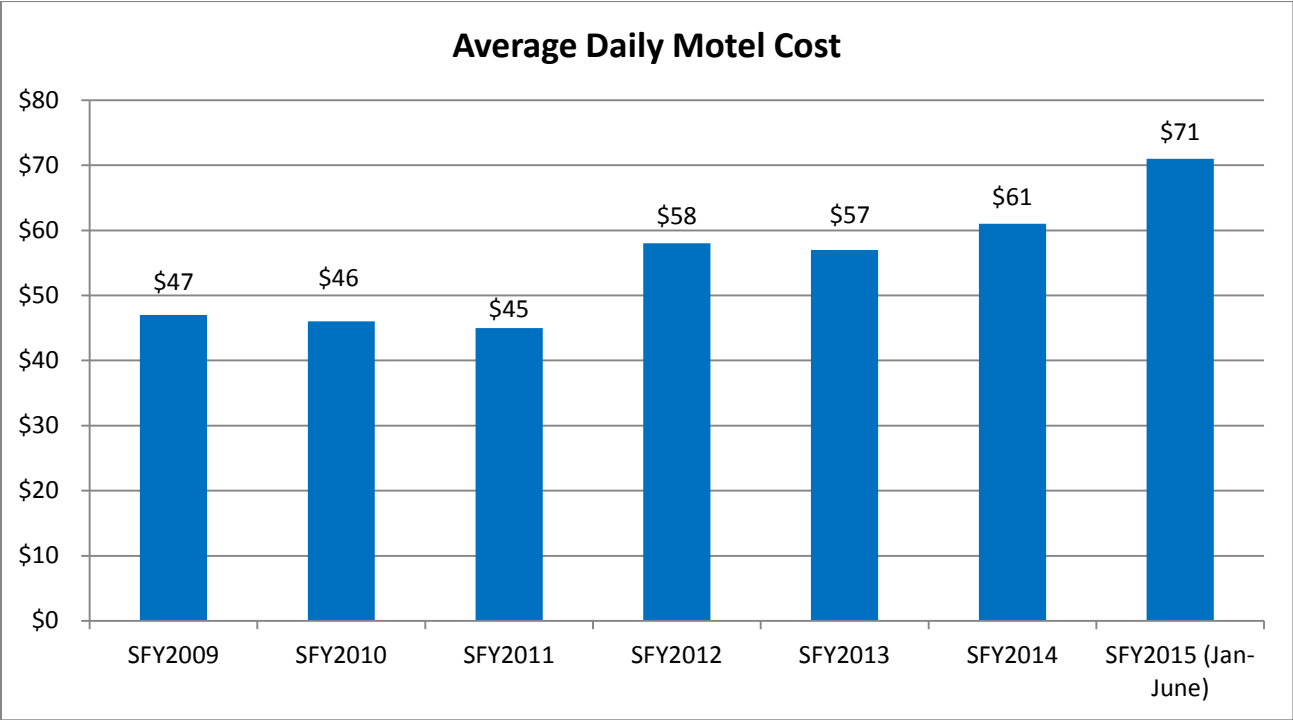
APPENDIX C: GA Housing Data Tables (Statewide: January – June 2015)

Statewide temporary housing data for January – June 2015



Statewide Temporary Housing Data for January – June 2015





APPENDIX D: Primary Stated Cause of Homelessness

Primary Causes of Homelessness in Vermont	St. Albans	Burlington	Hartford	St. Johnsbury	Brattleboro	Barre	Newport	Rutland	Springfield	Bennington	Morrisville	Middlebury	Statewide Ranking	Combined districts' ranking statewide in each category of homelessness (top 4 areas only)
Benefit Issues (SSI, UC, CS, Voucher, St Assistance)														0
Chronic Homelessness	1	2	4	3	4	1	2	2	5	1	1	5	2	12
Could not afford housing			3		2			5			4	4		5
Domestic Violence/Child Abuse	2	1	1	1	1	2	3	1	4	2	2	1	1	12
Eviction with Cause		4		5		5	4		2	4			5	6
Eviction without Cause/Non-renewal	4	5	5	4	3	4		4	3	5	5	3	4	11
Job Loss / Unemployment / Under-employment	5						5							2
Kicked out of Family/Friends	3	3	2	2	5	3	1	3	1	3	3	2	3	12
Overcrowded/Under-housed														
Unexpected Expenses (car repair)														

STATEWIDE - Top Four Stated Causes of Homelessness for Persons Applying for GA Temporary Housing

Domestic Violence/Child Abuse	1
Chronic Homelessness	2
Kicked out of Family/Friends	3
Eviction without Cause/Non-renewal	4

APPENDIX E: GA Emergency Housing 2009-2015 Overview

GA Overview	Unique cases	Total Days	Avg Days
SFY2009	1,140	25,516	22
SFY2010	1,740	23,564	14
SFY2011	1,448	31,934	22
SFY2012	1,954	38,350	20
SFY2013	2,851	71,770	25
SFY2014	2,796	52,087	19
SFY2015 (Jan-June)	1,973	36,442	18.5