



January 6, 2016

TO: Rep. Helen Head, Chair
Rep. Tom Stevens, Vice Chair
House General, Housing, and Military Affairs

FROM: Auburn Watersong, Associate Director of Public Policy

For years, advocates have known that domestic violence is a primary cause of homelessness for women and families. Too often a victim is forced to make the untenable choice between violence and homelessness. In Vermont, this choice is becoming increasingly more prevalent.

- **One in Three Families in Hotels/Motels:** From July 2014 through June 2015, 308 family households were granted emergency housing assistance by AHS out of a total of 989 families. This means that nearly 1 in 3 hotel/motel vouchers for families with children were domestic violence related in SFY 15. (Nearly 1 in 5 single adults received a voucher based on domestic violence during that same time).¹
- **The need is rising for victims:**
 - Emergency Shelter grant funding reports indicated an increase in emergency housing need from 33% of homeless families in 2012 to 49% of homeless families spending their stay at domestic and sexual violence shelters in 2014.
- **One night in shelter is one night too many:**
 - In the most recent national domestic violence census, in one day in September of 2014, 167 domestic violence victims (78 children and 89 adults) found refuge in emergency shelters or transitional housing provided by local domestic violence programs.²

¹ *GA Emergency Housing Data SFY 15*, AHS, August 2015.

² *Domestic Violence Counts: Census 2014 Report*, National Network to End Domestic Violence, January, 2015.

- On one night in January 2015, across all emergency housing systems in Vermont, 256 persons (or nearly 18%) reported as a victim of domestic violence. Since this number did not include the number of children impacted, it is likely much higher.³
- **Housing is unaffordable:**
 - The latest national data tells us that in Vermont a person must earn more than \$20 an hour to afford rent for a modest two bedroom apartment. With Vermont’s current minimum wage at \$9.60/hour, this means that a single person must work more than 85 hours a week to afford such an apartment.⁴
 - *The General Assistance Emergency Housing Bi-Annual Report* to the legislature, presented in July of 2015, revealed that “the need for emergency housing and its cost continues to be prohibitively expensive, particularly among households with victims of domestic violence.” The report recognized that long-term funding for emergency housing through hotels and motels would not be sustainable.
- **Shelters are bottlenecked:**
 - Victim advocates report an increased length of stay at emergency shelters due to a lack of safe, affordable housing for victims in their communities.
 - Statewide, in 2015 alone, Vermont’s domestic and sexual violence shelters and programs provided nearly 35,000 bednights to victims and their children (an increase of 6,000 bednights from 2015).
- **Shelters are at capacity:**
 - In 2015, 773 persons were housed in our 10 emergency shelters and our shelters had to turn away 357 people due to inadequate capacity.⁵
- **Victim Safety is compromised:** National studies have indicated that as many as 44%, almost half of all victims of domestic violence stayed in abusive relationships because they had nowhere else to go.⁶

The Network member programs work tirelessly every day with numerous community agencies and partners to ensure that victims do not have to make such untenable choices. The Network Coalition has long established partnerships with other statewide agencies and coalitions in order to increase

³ 2015 Vermont Point-In-Time Annual Statewide Count of the Homeless, Jan. 2015.

⁴ 2014 State Housing Profile – Vermont, National Low Income Housing Coalition, Sept. 2014, with edits.

⁵ 2015 Annual Report, Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, January 2016.

⁶ In 2003, 44% of homeless women in Fargo, North Dakota, reported that they had previously stayed in abusive relationships because they had nowhere else to go; in Minnesota, 46%. Wilder Research Center, *Homeless in Minnesota 2003* 22, 38 (2004).

victim access to emergency housing, homeless prevention, and longer-term housing supports. The Network continues to seek every possible option to increase victim access to safe, affordable housing and decrease victim homelessness. To that end, the Network has developed the following comprehensive **2016 HOUSING STRATEGIC PLAN** which includes these focal points:

1. Homelessness Prevention: Emergency Assistance Funds

We are requesting an increase in the Housing Assistance grant that we currently administer from \$60k to \$100k. These funds are granted by the Office of Economic Opportunity and have been crucial in assisting victims and survivors with re-housing and homeless prevention related cost.

2. Emergency Housing: Hotel/Motel Vouchers

We are working with the Agency of Human Services to clarify victims access to emergency shelter-including hotels and motels through the AHS/DCF/Economic Services Division - by adopting a housing eligibility screening tool which would result in a more effective, uniform, and consistent statewide policy.

3. Transitional Housing: Breaking the cycle of homelessness

We want to help remove homelessness in the lives of victims and survivors and transitional housing is an important tool in helping people stay off the streets and on their way to safe, stable and independent living. In concert with Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition (VAHC) and Pathways from Poverty, we are requesting \$1m of an anticipated minimum \$6m in housing related revenue from the currently proposed occupancy fee bill. ***To that end, The Network respectfully requests that the House Committee on General, Housing, and Military Affairs consider sending letter of recommendation to House Ways and Means in support of amending H.472 accordingly.***

4. Permanent Housing: Supporting Housing Policies and Full Funding

The Network will continue our strong partnerships and support of the VAHC legislative agenda and the housing recommendations of Pathways from Poverty – both of which include full funding of Vermont Housing Conservation Board which funds developments of low-income housing for Vermonters.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our concerns with you. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Auburn L. Watersong