
**Report to
The Vermont Legislature**

**Budget Adjustment Report on
Housing and Shelter Assistance**

In Accordance with 2016 H.611 Sec. 72

Submitted to: House Appropriations;
Senate Appropriations;
House Human Services;
House General, Housing, and Military Affairs;
Senate Health and Welfare;

Submitted by: Ken Schatz, Commissioner
Department for Children and Families

Prepared by: Geoffrey Pippenger, GA Program Director

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Part I: Overview of General Assistance and Emergency Housing Programs in DCF	3
Part II: Budgeted Funds and Usage – State Fiscal Year to Date	5
Part III: Projections	7
Part IV: Community-based Alternatives to General Assistance Motels	7
Conclusion	9

Introduction

Per the 2016 Budget Adjustment bill H.611,

“the Department for Children and Families shall provide a report on the funds spent year-to-date, through January and funds authorized through February 28, 2016, in the General Assistance budget for emergency housing and homelessness assistance that details the budgeted funds, usage, and projections for the remainder of the fiscal year for each type of housing service or assistance provided. The report shall also include the status on the development of alternatives to using motels as a solution for emergency housing, including a summary of programs and projects funded through the Office of Economic Opportunity.”

The emergency housing system includes motel voucher use through the General Assistance (GA) program; GA community-based alternatives to motel usage and shelter programs administered by the Office of Economic Opportunity. The Housing Opportunity Grant Program (HOP) supports the above shelter programming.

In the fall of State Fiscal Year 2016 (SFY16), emergency housing spending experienced a concerning increase. Indications show fewer people were accessing emergency housing assistance but for longer durations of time. This trend was partially reversed due to the leveling effects of community-based alternatives to GA motels in three primary locations and an unusually warm winter. DCF also witnessed an increase in the numbers of applicants seeking emergency housing assistance due to fleeing domestic violence.

Part I: Overview of General Assistance and Emergency Housing Programs in DCF

Per VSA Title 33, Chapter 21, the General Assistance program (GA) provides assistance for “the necessities of life including food, clothing, shelter, fuel, electricity, medical care, and other items as the Commissioner may prescribe by regulation when a need is found to exist and the applicant is otherwise found eligible.” GA offers emergency housing assistance to applicants who meet basic eligibility criteria under one of two categories: 1) “catastrophic” for a benefit up to 84 days in a 12 month period or 2) “vulnerable” for a benefit up to 28 days in a 12 month period. To be eligible under the “catastrophic” category, clients must have become homeless due to circumstances such as natural disaster, constructive eviction, court ordered eviction over which the applicant had no control, death of a spouse or minor child, or domestic violence. To be eligible under the “vulnerable” category, an applicant must have a dependent under the age of 6, be age 65 or older, be in receipt of SSI/SSDI, or be in the third trimester of pregnancy. Applicants under the “vulnerable” category cannot have caused their own loss of housing within the last six months. Additionally, the Cold Weather Exception (CWE) dictates that eligibility for temporary housing be relaxed when specific conditions exist or are anticipated to exist between the hours of 6pm and 6am. According to policy, those conditions include either 1) temperatures or wind chills less than 20 degrees Fahrenheit or 2) temperatures less than 32 degrees Fahrenheit with a higher than 50% chance of precipitation reported. 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.

Intake and eligibility for GA emergency housing is determined in each of the Economic Services Division's (ESD) 12 district offices. Vermonters seeking GA emergency housing apply at the local ESD office; 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. ESD policies mandate that emergency shelters, where they exist, remain the first resource for homeless families and individuals needing emergency shelter. If shelter space is not available or appropriate for a given situation, ESD will then provide a GA motel voucher to eligible clients; in Chittenden County, Harbor Place is the first placement consideration for a motel voucher.

Since November 2013, ESD has worked with Champlain Housing Trust managed Harbor Place (HP) to provide GA emergency housing which has onsite access to case management services. DCF contracted access to 30 rooms at a cost of \$38 per night. This arrangement guarantees ESD a minimum number of beds in Chittenden County, a significant savings compared to average motel costs.

Vermont's publicly funded shelters are financed through DCF's Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). The Housing Opportunity Grant Program (HOP) blends together federal and state funding to support more than 40 nonprofit organizations across Vermont, including community and faith-based organizations. HOP provides funding to:

- operate emergency overnight and day shelter space;
- provide essential services to shelter residents;
- provide transitional housing where appropriate;
- rapidly re-house homeless individuals and families in permanent housing;
- prevent individuals and families experiencing a housing crisis from becoming homeless;
- implement coordinated entry, streamlining client access to resources;
- administer the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS).

Through HOP, the Office of Economic Opportunity supports basic operations and essential services at 29 overnight emergency shelters, including 4 warming shelters open only during cold weather months and 9 shelters for persons fleeing domestic/sexual violence. In addition, funding supports three day shelters for people experiencing homelessness. Shelters range in size from only a few rooms for families to more than thirty beds for single adults.

For a full summary of the SFY16 Housing Opportunity Grant Program (HOP): <http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/OEO/training/HOP-Grants-SFY2016.pdf>

For the SFY 2016 Emergency Shelter Report: <http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/OEO/Docs/ESG-Final-Report.pdf>

Part II: Budgeted Funds and Usage – State Fiscal Year to Date

Through February of SFY 16, General Assistance (GA) emergency housing has spent \$2,281,321; a 15.7% decrease relative to the same point in SFY 15. Between July 2015 and the end of December 2015, the GA program granted emergency housing benefits to 1,097 unduplicated households for a total of 20,585 shelter nights. Of those households 649 were singles, and 448 were families involving a total of 800 children. Approximately one half of authorized households reported being victims of domestic violence.

The first table below shows monthly expenditures for GA emergency housing; it breaks down the number of households served by month and category. Note that the total number of unduplicated households (1,097) is less than the total number of households granted when the data is parsed by month (1,699). That discrepancy results from instances in which a unique household may have been authorized benefits in more than one month.

State of VT July 2015 - July 2016									
Household Authorizations Unduplicated By Month									
		Catastrophic							
July	# Households Authorized	DV	Other	Auto Vulnerable	Other	CWE	# HP Nights	# Nights	Actual Expenditures
TOTALS	262	151	32	78	1	0	809	3434	\$ 216,824.00
August	# Households Authorized	DV	Other	Auto Vulnerable	Other	CWE	# HP Nights	# Nights	Actual Expenditures
TOTALS	254	144	25	82	3	0	422	3262	\$ 275,195.00
September	# Households Authorized	DV	Other	Auto Vulnerable	Other	CWE	# HP Nights	# Nights	Actual Expenditures
TOTALS	308	179	38	86	5	0	821	4339	\$ 288,401.00
October	# Households Authorized	DV	Other	Auto Vulnerable	Other	CWE	# HP Nights	# Nights	Actual Expenditures
TOTALS	304	178	36	88	2	0	606	4047	\$ 257,026.00
November	# Households Authorized	DV	Other	Auto Vulnerable	Other	CWE	# HP Nights	# Nights	Actual Expenditures
TOTALS	272	109	36	55	2	70	471	2842	\$ 408,416.00
December	# Households Authorized	DV	Other	Auto Vulnerable	Other	CWE	# HP Nights	# Nights	Actual Expenditures
TOTALS	299	97	35	67	3	97	408	2661	\$ 338,892.00
STATE	# Households Authorized	DV	Other	Auto Vulnerable	Other	CWE	# HP Nights	# Nights	Actual Expenditures
TOTALS	1699	858	202	456	16	167	3537	20585	\$ 1,784,754.00

The following table provides a comparison of spending on motels during the current fiscal year and the previous three fiscal years. These expenditures reflect payment for bills from the previous month. Note that the emergency housing rules changed between SFY13 and SFY14, resulting in a tightening of eligibility for vulnerable populations. It is also worth noting that the 2015 seasonal alternatives and

shelters came online between November 2015 and January 2016; the effect of those options are largely reflected in the numbers for December and beyond.

Month	SFY 16	SFY 15	SFY 14	SFY 13
July	\$270,716	\$207,975	\$307,780	\$262,667
August	\$216,824	\$223,276	\$247,573	\$209,654
September	\$275,195	\$172,418	\$267,912	\$305,316
October	\$288,401	\$274,816	\$202,957	\$375,870
November	\$257,026	\$245,504	\$182,479	\$308,454
December	\$408,416	\$350,299	\$275,468	\$349,363
January	\$338,892	\$508,803	\$351,926	\$564,636
February	\$225,851	\$656,456	\$416,717	\$426,518
March		\$673,280	\$527,431	\$526,815
April		\$505,474	\$453,359	\$453,359
May		\$193,091	\$388,741	\$388,741
June		\$318,262	\$128,808	\$444,332
Totals	\$2,281,321	\$4,329,654	\$3,781,151	\$4,615,725

In three districts with community-based alternatives to GA motels (see page 7), ESD has seen a marked and precipitous reduction of spending on hotel and motel vouchers. These alternatives came online in November and December 2015. As illustrated in the tables below, the Burlington, St. Johnsbury, and Middlebury District Offices have all experienced significant savings and reduced traffic in their respective offices.

Burlington District Office				
Month	SFY15	SFY16	% Change	Savings
November	\$47,054 (2014)	\$1,860 (2015)	96% reduction	\$45,194
December	\$85,990 (2014)	\$21,120 (2015)	75% reduction	\$64,870
January	\$129,632 (2015)	\$20,726 (2016)	84% reduction	\$108,906

St. Johnsbury District Office				
Month	SFY15	SFY16	% Change	Savings
November	\$17,825 (2014)	\$22,629 (2015)	23% increase	-
December	\$61,051 (2014)	\$10,262 (2015)	84% reduction	\$50,789
January	\$49,532 (2015)	\$7,628 (2016)	85% reduction	\$41,904

Middlebury District Office				
Month	SFY15	SFY16	% Change	Savings
November	\$12,273 (2014)	\$4,064 (2015)	67% reduction	\$8,209
December	\$9,673 (2014)	\$2,674 (2015)	72% reduction	\$6,999
January	\$13,805 (2015)	\$2,835 (2016)	80% reduction	\$10,970

Part III: Projections

It is critical to acknowledge that projecting future use and spending for GA emergency housing is an extremely difficult and unpredictable task. GA is an emergency program whose benefits and expenditures are driven by events and factors which cannot be predicted: natural disasters, personal catastrophes, and drastically variable weather in a challenging and changing climate.

In projecting the remainder of the fiscal year, we anticipate the average spending trend will hold or stay level. The savings seen with the GA-funded community-based alternatives, combined with the unusually low number of CWE nights this year, should result in a total expenditure of close to the \$3.9 million budgeted for emergency housing (inclusive of BAA funds). This would constitute approximately \$3.1M in GA motel spending and \$800K in community-based alternatives.

Part IV: Community-based Alternatives to General Assistance Motels

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 and meet emergency shelter needs. DCF provided data on GA motel voucher usage by district and eligibility for the previous year, and met in earnest 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.

Letters of Interest were received on a rolling basis beginning in October from 11 out of 12 AHS Districts. For promising proposals, additional information was solicited through a work plan request and/or site visit. An emphasis was placed on strategies that would result in:

- A reduction in the use of GA motels
- Better outcomes for homeless individuals and families
- Cost savings for the State
- Close partnerships between community-based projects and the local DCF - Economic Services Division offices

These GA-funded “community-based alternatives” are administered by the Office of Economic Opportunity to align with existing performance measures, shelter monitoring, and project standards. DCF awarded a total of \$788,544 in grants to 11 organizations providing community-based solutions in meeting the emergency housing needs of Vermonters. These grants will be used to increase the availability of seasonal warming shelters and to add capacity to emergency shelters; short-term transitional housing and services for homeless families with children; emergency housing for youth; and emergency housing and services for victims fleeing violence

Current community-based alternatives include:

Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS), Burlington, \$325,141

COTS will operate a seasonal (November – March), low-barrier warming shelter to provide emergency shelter for homeless individuals in Burlington. Additional bed capacity added in Burlington: 50 beds. Approximate cost/bed/night: \$42.76

Charter House, Middlebury, \$14,000

Charter House operates an OEO/DCF supported seasonal (October - April) warming shelter for individuals. This project adds three separate rooms of emergency shelter for homeless families. Charter House works closely with the local housing solutions team to ensure families are connected with housing case management. Approximate cost/room/night: \$25.93

John Graham Housing & Services, Vergennes, \$14,800

John Graham Housing & Services provides emergency shelter and transitional housing for homeless individuals and families in Addison County. They recently acquired a building in Middlebury to provide supportive housing. This project sets aside two, two-room units as short-term transitional (<90 days) housing expanding crisis bed capacity from November - June. This new crisis capacity serves families and victims of domestic violence with shelter and onsite services. Approximate cost/room/night: \$20.27

Good Samaritan Haven, Barre, \$27,339

Good Samaritan Haven operates a 26-bed emergency shelter in Barre for adults only. This project funds seasonal (December – mid-April) emergency shelter overflow capacity (14 beds) at Hedding United Methodist Church. Good Samaritan Haven will offer case management to guests and coordinate referrals closely with the district Economic Services Office. Approximate cost/bed/night: \$16.08

Capstone Community Action, Barre, \$85,154

Capstone will lease six, two-room apartments from January - June to provide short-term transitional (<90 days) housing for homeless families. The project creates the only non-DV crisis bed capacity for families with children in Washington County. Downstreet Housing is subcontracted for property management. The project includes a part-time housing case manager to provide home-, office-, and motel-based services. Approximate cost/room/night (including funded services): \$38.88

Upper Valley Haven, Hartford, \$94,340

Upper Valley Haven will lease six, two-room apartments from Twin Pines Housing Trust from January - June to provide short-term transitional (<90 days) housing for homeless families. The project includes a full-time housing case manager to provide home- and motel-based services. Approximate cost/room/night (including funded services): \$43.08

Women's Freedom Center, Brattleboro, \$74,745

Women's Freedom Center provides emergency housing and services to individuals and families fleeing domestic or sexual violence in southeastern Vermont. In this project, Women's Freedom Center will accept 100% of referrals from the Brattleboro ESD office to provide housing for victims using their existing shelter and a pool of funds for motel stays that the Center operates independently. In this way, the Center will be able to quickly and directly engage families and individuals who might otherwise be disconnected from services (February - June).

Northeast Kingdom Community Action, St Johnsbury and Newport, \$91,004

In concert with local partners, the Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA) will operate two seasonal warming shelters to provide emergency shelter for homeless individuals. St Johnsbury: 10 beds + 2 overflow beds from December – mid April; Newport: 6 beds from February – mid April. NEKCA provides housing case management. Both projects rely heavily on volunteers. Approximate cost/bed/night: St Johnsbury, \$38.91 and Newport, \$37.04

Washington County Youth Service Bureau, Montpelier, \$14,389

Washington County Youth Service Bureau will lease two efficiency apartments from Downstreet Housing from February - June to provide emergency housing for unaccompanied homeless youth (ages 18-22). The project leverages existing case management and support services at the Youth Service Bureau to provide home-based services and youth appropriate interventions. Approximate cost/room/night: \$47.33

Groundworks Collaborative, Brattleboro, \$26,900

Groundworks Collaborative will lease three, two-room apartments from February - June to provide short-term transitional (<90 days) housing for homeless families. Services are provided in partnership with SEVCA and other area partners. Approximate cost/room/night: \$29.90

Southeastern Vermont Community Action SEVCA, Brattleboro, \$21,328

SEVCA will employ a full-time housing support coordinator from March – June. The position will work in close coordination with the local Economic Services District office to quickly receive referrals to provide services for all households staying in GA-funded motels. The housing support work will both provide motel-based outreach and housing navigation services to some of those referred and for others, they will quickly coordinate service connections through the local Housing Review Team. The housing support worker may also provide housing navigation services to those staying in short-term transitional apartments leased by Groundworks.

Establishing these new community-based projects leveraged thousands of hours of in-kind project support from community partners. Each represents a significant planning and start-up effort. Altogether, these projects represent 73 beds and 39 rooms of additional crisis capacity across Vermont. The projects came online at different points in the year, and most of new bed capacity is only seasonal. Through the end of February, 370 people received 8,412 bed-nights of emergency shelter through these community-based alternatives to motels.

Conclusion

The implementation of community-based alternatives to GA motel vouchers has provided some encouraging results. We recognize, however, that those alternatives have only been on board for a relatively short period of time and in a limited number of communities. More data and experience will be needed in order to draw more concrete conclusions about the overall effectiveness and impact of these alternatives. Ultimate success will not only be determined by GA motel savings, but by the ability to quickly connect those served with the resources and supports needed to find and retain permanent housing by those experiencing homelessness.

Although there are reasons to be optimistic about the decreasing trends in reliance on motel usage, we understand that there are still many challenges ahead. More investigation is needed into emerging trends such as the decrease in numbers served by motels but for longer durations of stay. The data also shows a concerning increase in the numbers of applicants seeking emergency housing due to domestic violence. It is extremely important that we work with community partners to address any increased need in a thoughtful and effective way.

We strongly support the continuance of identifying and developing community-based alternatives to GA emergency housing going forward. Our State and community partners have acknowledged that reliance on motels as emergency housing may provide a temporary roof overhead, however it is not good public policy for reducing homelessness, nor does it provide the needed connection to services that help individuals and families find and sustain permanent housing. We believe as more community-based GA alternative projects are proposed and come online, they will help alleviate the continued GA budget pressures. More importantly, this approach will help create a more effective and efficient emergency housing program employed by AHS to alleviate and prevent homelessness.