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**Report to**  
**The Vermont Legislature**

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**GENERAL ASSISTANCE EMERGENCY HOUSING REPORTS**

**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 General, Housing and Military  
Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs  
House Committee on Appropriations  
Senate Committee on Appropriations

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

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**Report Date:** January 31, 2016



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## Executive Summary

As a part of the 2014 Appropriations Act, the General Assembly directed the Department for Children and Families (DCF) in the Agency of Human Services (AHS) to continue administering an Emergency Housing (EH) program within the General Assistance (GA) program. This program allows for the provision of emergency housing in catastrophic situations, for certain vulnerable populations, and during inclement weather under the Cold Weather Exemption (CWE). The Act also created flexibility when providing those services through the GA program in order to “to mitigate poverty and serve applicants more effectively than they are currently being served with the same amount of General Assistance funds.”

The Act required AHS to develop:

- (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 motel payments; and
- (3) A system for ensuring the safety and health of clients who are housed in motels.

The act also required the submission of new bi-annual reports to the legislature. These reports must contain data relating to the use of emergency housing vouchers from the preceding six months and contain information specific to key program areas including:

- 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 such other relevant data as the Secretary deems appropriate.

Below, and included in the appendices, are data and information related to these statutory mandates.

## Section I: General Assistance Housing Program Management

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

Vermonters seeking 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. 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 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 works 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, Inc. and Disability Rights Vermont, the Department for Children and Families piloted 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, and Vermont Legal Aid). The pilot was put into place and a memo was sent out alerting interested parties of the pilot and the availability of this scheduling option. For the period of July through December 2015, the Burlington District Office offered the appointment window to three separate advocates at Safe Harbor for three unique clients. Those clients subsequently asked for and received accommodations to apply for benefits via mail or phone. Consequently, those advocates ended up not taking advantage of the appointment window.

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

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 \$58 per night. The following data reflect the average number of beds used per night for the contracted rooms:

- For the period of July through December 2015, a total of 3,457 nights at Harbor Place were granted.
- During the months of November and December 2015, twenty-three (23) nights were paid at a total cost of \$1,507.08 for emergency housing under CWE at Harbor Place.

## II. *Warming Shelters:*

With AHS and DCF support, several communities have set up local warming shelters for homeless individuals to have a warm and safe place to sleep. Currently DCF supports eight warming shelters located in Barre, Brattleboro, Burlington, Hartford, Middlebury, Springfield, St. Johnsbury and the Bellows Falls area.

The Middlebury Charter House warming shelter for families opened in early November. The Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA) warming shelter in St. Johnsbury and the Good Samaritan Haven overflow shelter in Barre opened the first week in December 2015. NEKCA's Newport warming shelter is expected to open in early February.

The Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS) opened its new Burlington Winter Warming Shelter with a permitted capacity of forty (40) beds on November 3, 2015. From its opening through January 4, 2016, it has provided shelter for 151 unduplicated guests with an average length of stay of four (4) days. Of those individuals served: 22% were identified as chronically homeless, 22% reported having received a GA emergency housing voucher for CWE as their only assistance in the past year, and 66% reported have no income. Significant percentages of those served self-reported mental health problems and substance abuse issues.

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 to shelter first, Harbor Place second, and then 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. People experiencing homelessness, and often with medical needs, require a warm, safe place to be during the day.

## **Section III: 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 with the goal of decreasing reliance on motels while meeting emergency shelter needs. DCF 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. Local data on GA motel voucher usage was provided by district and eligibility for the previous year. The proposed alternatives are expected to bring cost savings to the State through stronger outcomes for families and individuals; more effective service connections; and general cost comparison. All proposals are expected to meet DCF shelter standards as well as form close referral partnerships with the local Economic Services Division.

## **Section IV: Data Collection Processes**

The 12 ESD district offices collect the following data daily and submit a weekly spreadsheet to ESD central office for a statewide monthly and year-to-date 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 number granted;
- Number of categorically-eligible vulnerable population number granted;
- Number of eligible vulnerable points 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 or compile this data. Payments for Emergency Housing are made based on motel billing through ESD authorization forms. Once billing is received by ESD from a motel, 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.

## **Section V: 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 (EH). 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 during the 2015 calendar year.

## Section VI: Program Rules

The expedited vulnerable population rules for Emergency Housing (EH) in effect 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 July to December 2015 follows:

- **5,338** Emergency Housing applications were received, of these:
  - **2,979** were granted; **2,359** were denied.
  - **1,637** singles were granted; **1,637** singles were denied.
  - **1,342** families were granted; **722** families were denied.
  - Of the **6,060** adults in households requesting emergency housing; **3,371** were granted.
  - Of the **3,700** children in households requesting emergency housing; **2,422** were granted.
  - **1,881** applications were found eligible under the catastrophic criteria.
  - **800** applications were found eligible under the vulnerable population criteria.
  - **24** applications were found eligible under vulnerable points (see eligibility criteria)
- **20,594** bed nights were paid for at an average cost of **\$73/night**.

## Section VII: Cold Weather Exception

The following data reflects the Cold Weather Exception (CWE) nights for July through December 2015.

- The first CWE night for this period occurred on November 17.
- There were a total of 15 CWE days during that period – 7 in November and 8 in December. This represents a significant decrease of number of days compared to the same period for 2014 which saw 41 CWE nights.
- For November and December 2015, DCF spent an estimated \$18,596.92 on CWE grants. This represents 256 nights at an average cost of \$72 per night. Although this represents significantly less spending than in November and December 2014 (a total of \$263,322), it is critical to keep in mind the drastic – and uncontrollable – difference in weather and temperature between those two years.

## Conclusion

This report demonstrates that the Department and Agency have successfully deployed emergency housing benefits to meet the crisis housing need in 2015. However, as has been the case in previous reports, it is evident that the need and cost for emergency housing continues to increase. This trend is particularly concerning given the relatively late start to the cold weather season in FY16 and the impact that CWE grants

will likely have on shelter capacity and spending on motels. Long-term funding for emergency housing in this manner is not sustainable.

During the timeframe covered by this report, the Department for Children and Families Housing Team (ESD, OEO, and the Commissioner’s Office) worked with housing stakeholders to re-design the GA Emergency Housing Program to reduce the 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 for reducing homelessness in Vermont. The work to identify and analyze community needs; inventory local resources; develop the needed infrastructure to streamline access to housing help; and spur community-based alternatives to motels continues. As more community-based GA alternative projects are proposed and come online, we anticipate they will help alleviate budget pressures on the GA program. More importantly, this approach will help create a more effective and efficient emergency housing program employed by AHS to prevent and alleviate homelessness.

## APPENDIX A: Aggregate GA Housing (July – December 2015)

Total # housing requests	# of housing requests Granted	# of housing requests Denied	# singles Granted housing	# singles Denied housing	# families Granted housing	# families Denied housing	# of adults Granted	# of children Granted	Catastrophic Granted
5,338	2,979	2,359	1,637	1,637	1,342	722	3,371	2,422	1,881
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	
800	24	20,594	\$72.94	\$1,502,075.97	262	279	121	256	

### Potential Denial Reasons

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

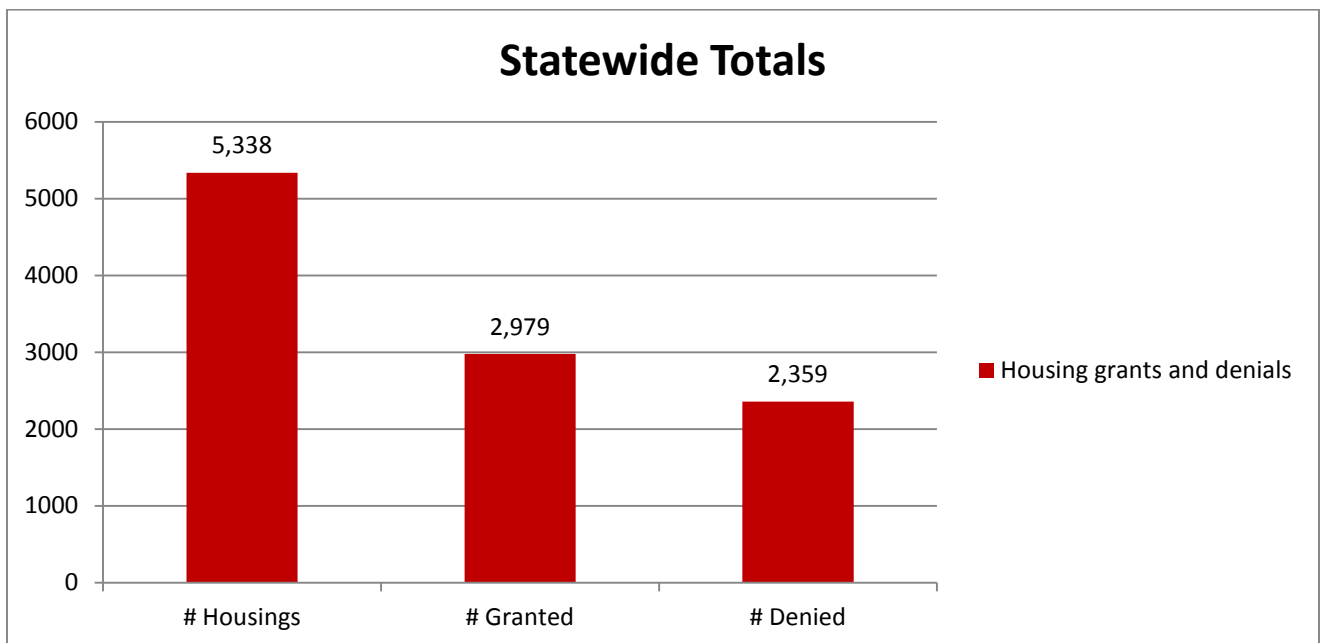


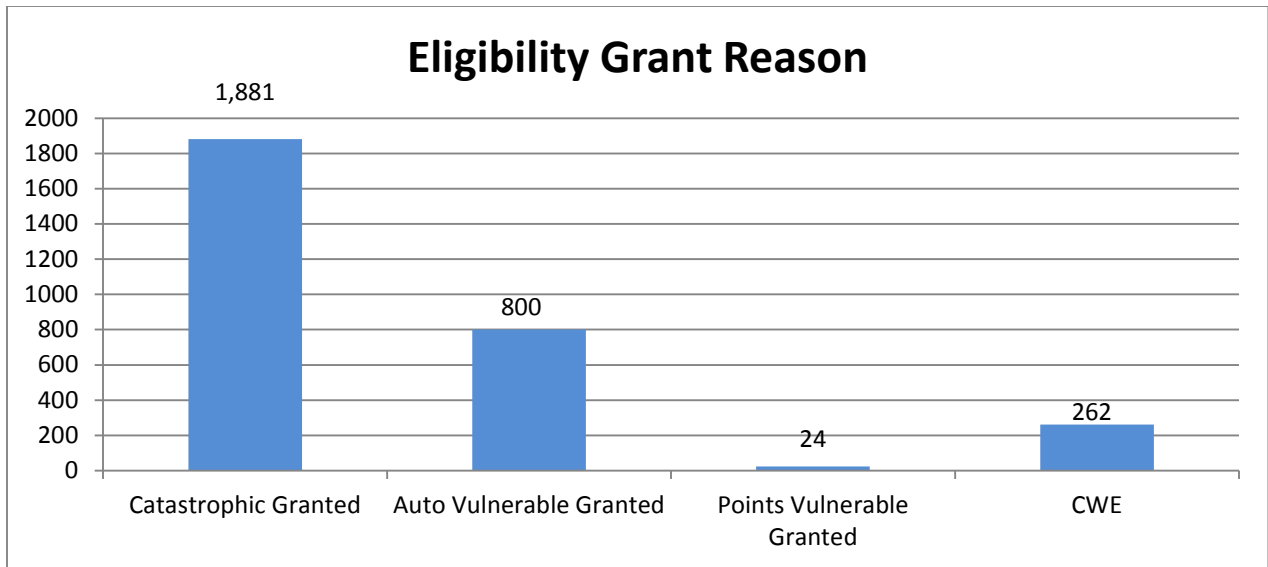
## APPENDIX B: GA Housing Denial Data (July – December 2015)

July - December GA/EA Denials							
Total Denied Applications							
2359							
Households with Adults ONLY			Households with Child(ren)				
	1637	69%		722	31%		
Top 5 Denial Reasons			Top 5 Denial Reasons				
1	Ineligible	595	36%	1	Has Other Housing Options	203	28%
2	Has Other Housing Options	429	26%	2	Caused Homelessness	145	20%
3	Caused Homelessness	198	12%	3	Ineligible	132	18%
4	Available Resources	109	7%	4	Available Resources	70	10%
5	Max Nights	93	6%	5	Max Nights	61	8%

## APPENDIX C: GA Housing Data Tables (Statewide: July – December 2015)

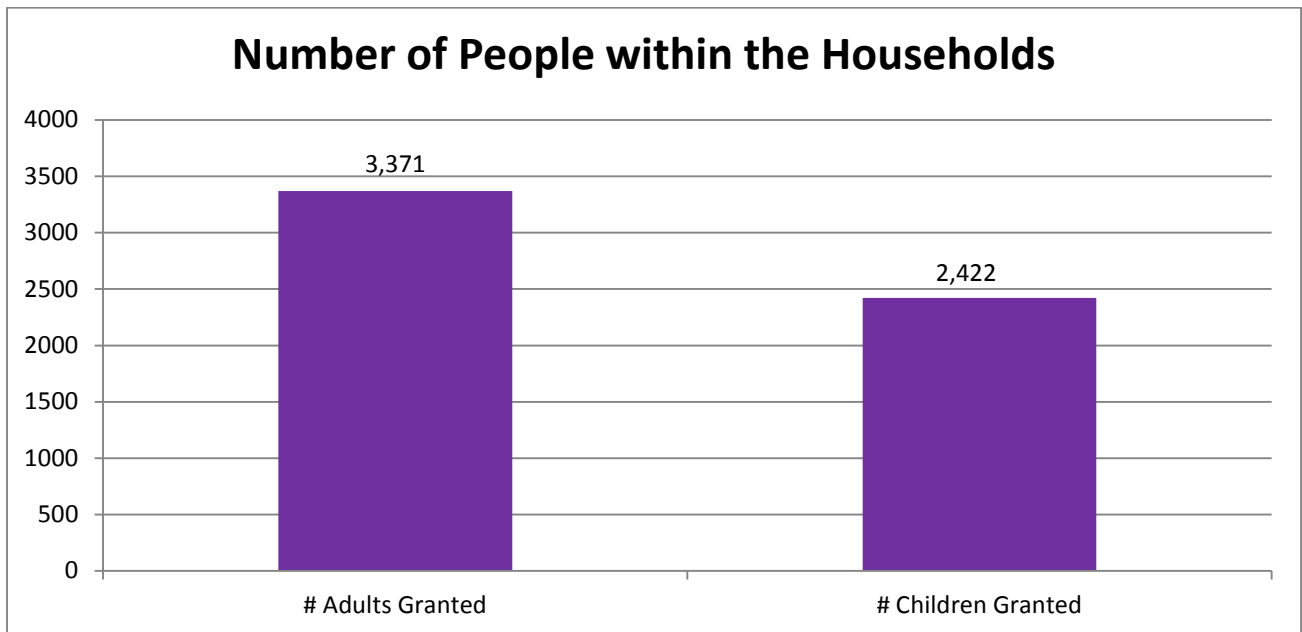
### Statewide temporary housing data for July – December 2015



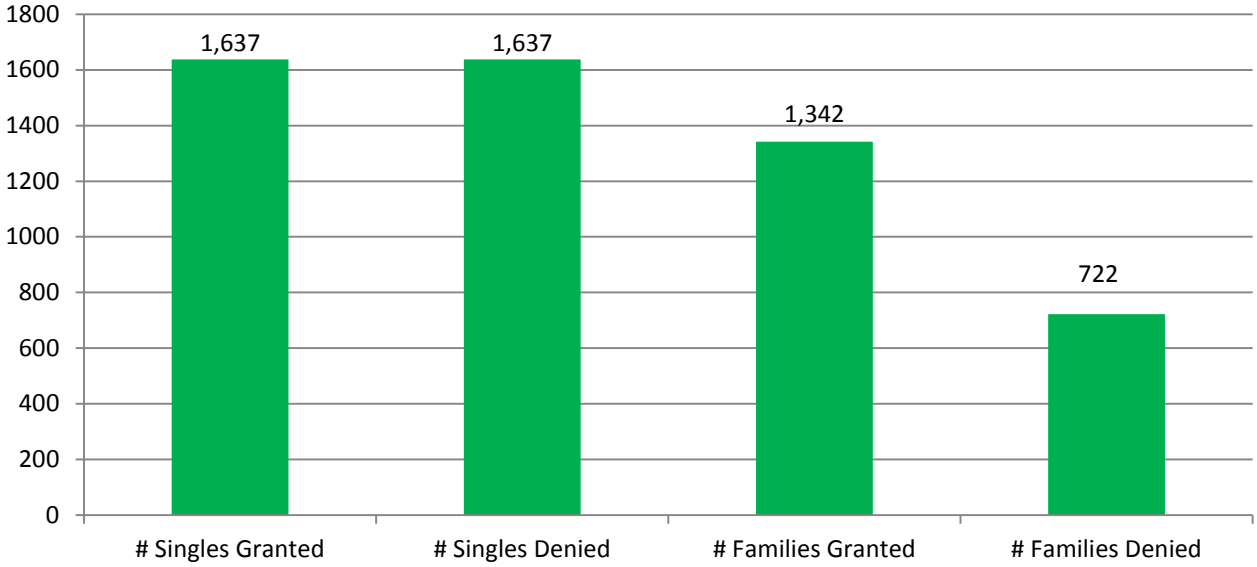


\*\* 12 Granted based on Fair Hearing

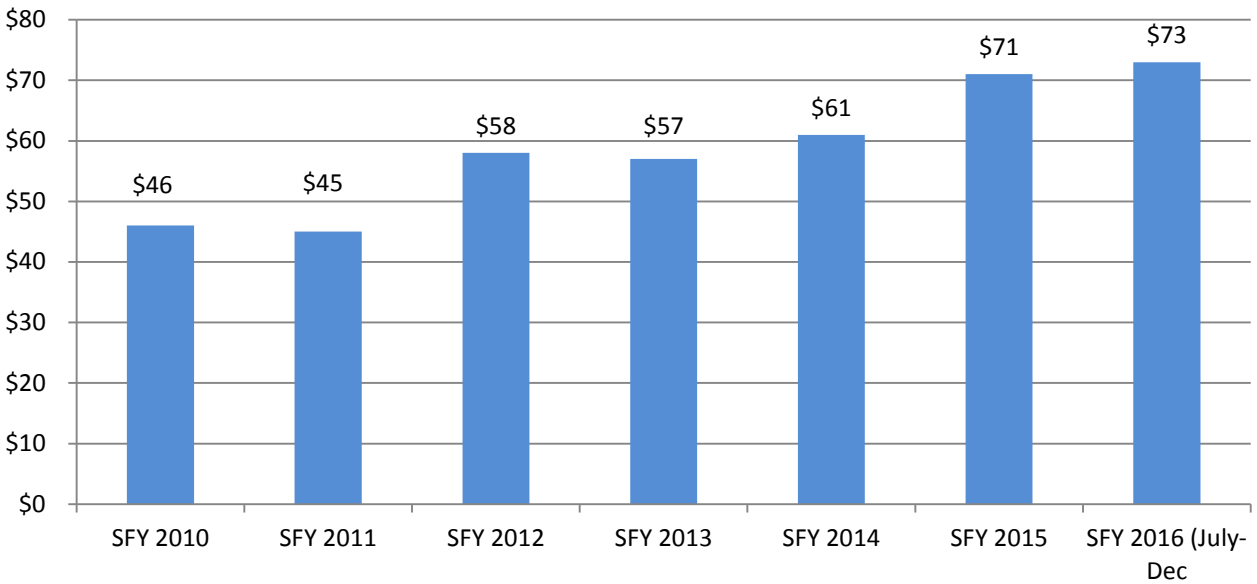
### Statewide Temporary Housing Data for July – December 2015



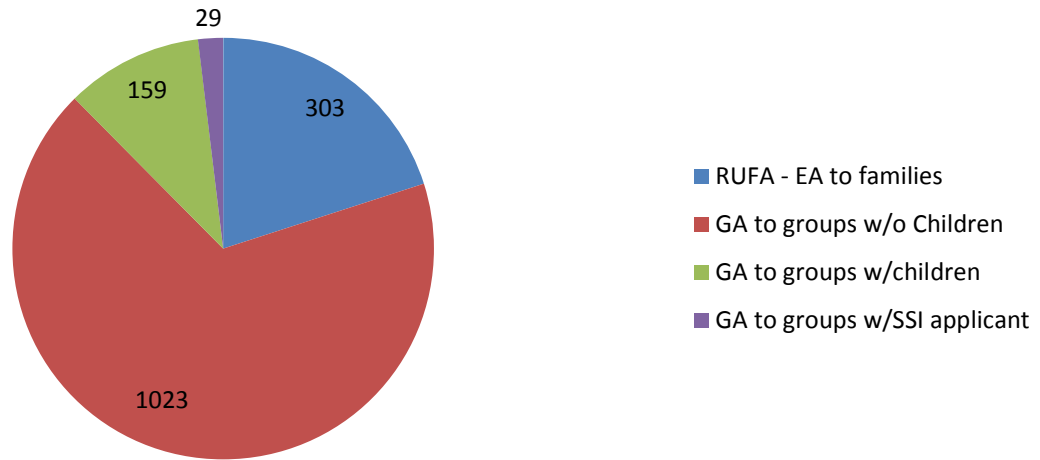
## Applicant Households



## Average Daily Motel Cost



## GA/EA Temporary Housing Unduplicated Case Count (July - December)



### APPENDIX D: Primary Stated Cause of Homelessness

Primary Causes of Homelessness in Vermont	Districts												Combined districts' ranking across state in each category of homelessness	
	St. Albans	Burlington	Hartford	St. Johnsbury	Brattleboro	Barre	Newport	Rutland	Springfield	Bennington	Morrisville	Middlebury		Statewide
Benefit Issues (SSI, UC, CS, Voucher, St Assistance)														
Chronic Homelessness	1	2	2	2	2	1	2	4	4	3	3	2	2	<b>12</b>
Could not afford housing							5	5						<b>2</b>
Domestic Violence/Child Abuse	3	1	1	1	1	2	3	1	3	1	2	1	1	<b>12</b>
Eviction with Cause	5	5	5	5	5	5			5	5	4	4	5	<b>10</b>
Eviction without Cause/Non-renewal		4	4	3	3	4	4	3	2	4	5	5	4	<b>11</b>
Job Loss/Unemployment/Underemployment	4													<b>1</b>
Kicked out of Family/Friends	2	3	3	4	4	3	1	2	1	2	1	3	3	<b>12</b>
Overcrowded/Underhoused														
Unexpected Expenses (car repair)														
<b>STATEWIDE - Top Five Stated Causes of Homelessness for persons applying for GA Temporary Housing</b>														
Domestic Violence/Child Abuse	1													
Chronic Homelessness	2													
Kicked out of Family/Friends	3													
Eviction without Cause/Non-renewal	4													
Eviction with Cause	5													

## APPENDIX E: GA Emergency Housing 2008- 2016

SFY	Unique cases	Total Days	Ave Days
SFY2008	548	10468	19
SFY2009	1140	25516	22
SFY2010	1740	23564	14
SFY2011	1448	31934	22
SFY2012	1954	38350	20
SFY2013	2851	71770	25
SFY2014	2796	52087	19
SFY2015	2669	58227	22
FY2016 (Jul- Dec)	1514	25184	17