

The Agency of Human Services
Department for Children and Families
OFFICE OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Position Paper on Warming Shelters July, 2014 (updated 2018)

Introduction and Background

The Office of Economic Opportunity supports community-based efforts to permanently house people experiencing homelessness and to keep people safe and respectfully sheltered in emergency and short-term situations. OEO administers the Housing Opportunity Grant Program which blends together state and federal funding to support a range of homeless assistance strategies. Safe and welcoming emergency shelters and permanent housing options are mutually reinforcing when part of a coordinated system of care that is based on shared values, shared accountability and a shared mission. Emergency shelters are an important step to engage and support people until people can be appropriately matched to permanent housing.

In recent years, warming shelters have become an important part of Vermont's emergency shelter system while being regarded as a less expensive alternative to motels. DCF has invested significant General Assistance (GA) funds into community projects which offer an alternative to the GA emergency housing program. These funds have been invested through OEO in order to support welcoming, safe and respectful warming shelters. Warming shelter investments should include engagement and support services where the need is demonstrated and the resources available. Support for warming shelters is consistent with other state planning documents along with the Vermont State Legislature's appropriations in recent years. Support for warming shelters, however, is framed and limited by available resources and funding priorities which also include adequate funding and support to preserve the existing emergency shelter capacity along with preserving existing and effective permanent housing programs.

Purpose of Warming Shelters

1. To provide safe and welcoming seasonal¹ emergency shelter capacity when year-round shelters are near or at capacity and when there are insufficient permanent housing options.
2. To provide a first step to screen, engage and place people into more permanent housing.
3. To provide low barrier access for those who might be resistant to more formal housing or shelter settings.
4. To provide lower cost, community based access to shelter and services as an alternative to more expensive and disconnected motel stays.

Note: Typical warming shelter models (e.g., congregate beds, low barrier) are not considered appropriate for families with children. Warming shelters can and do serve victims fleeing domestic or sexual violence; however, other shelter resources (including motels) are often the most appropriate.

¹ November – April, or shorter.

General Criteria for Funding Warming Shelters

OEO supports warming shelters when:

1. There is data that demonstrates a need for a warming shelter, including an understanding of subpopulations who would be served by a warming shelter.
2. The plan for a warming shelter fits into its coordinated system to permanently house people experiencing homelessness. This coordinated system includes a continuity of care plan to assist people when the warming shelter is closed during the day. This local planning is best done through the local homeless Continuum of Care group and includes many community partners.
3. There are resources, expertise, and partnerships in place to implement a warming shelter that provides a welcoming, clean, safe and respectful environment that includes screening, engagement and referral services to help people get into permanent housing as quickly as possible.
4. There is a training plan in place for volunteers and staff to provide them with the basic information and advanced training on topics such as safety, de-escalation, principles of engagement, strength-based communication, screening and an introduction to mental health, substance abuse and trauma informed care.
5. The warming shelter meets and reports on the Housing Opportunity Grant Program performance measures.²
6. The shelter agrees to comply with state and/or federal funding requirements and to be monitored by OEO as a condition of funding.

Note: Additional criteria are described in the Housing Opportunity Grant Program notice of funding or separate warming shelter request for proposals.

Conclusion

OEO supports warming shelters when there is support from multiple community partners, when coordinated planning takes place through the local Continuum of Care, when there is sufficient experience and capacity in place to manage projects, when there is a demonstrated need and when services to meet immediate needs and exit people into permanent housing are integrated into the work of the shelter. OEO considers the need for warming shelters through a lens of limited resources which includes an existing homeless shelter and service network that faces constrained resources.

OEO considers permanent housing and emergency shelters as compatible and mutually reinforcing when the community has a coordinated system of care based on shared values, accountability and mission that are arrived at through open dialogue and strategic planning.

² <http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/OEO/Docs/HOP-Final-Report.pdf>