

Office of Economic Opportunity
Department for Children and Families
Testimony to House Committee on General, Housing and Military Affairs
Thursday, May 3, 2018

Warming Shelter Update

For an introduction and background on warming shelters, please see the Office of Economic Opportunity Position Paper on Warming Shelters.

Emergency & Warming Shelter Capacity

Vermont's emergency shelter capacity is dynamic and varies throughout Vermont based on population and need. Models of providing emergency shelter vary as well and may include a congregate setting, house, apartment, or motel.

DCF supports 38 emergency shelter projects:

- including 9 emergency shelter programs designated for victims fleeing domestic and/or sexual violence,
- 2 shelters designated for unaccompanied youth,
- 8 organizations provide emergency shelter in master-leased apartments,
- 9 organizations operate seasonal warming shelters (one shelter specifically for families), and
- 3 agencies have funding to provide shelter overflow in motels.

In shelters that serve families with children, a shelter may have beds that are empty in rooms that are considered full. For this reason, some shelter capacity is measured by room, while some is measured by beds.

Warming shelters generally serve as overflow shelter capacity and an alternative to General Assistance motel vouchers during cold weather months.

There are currently approximately 225 beds and 155 rooms of year-round emergency shelter capacity in Vermont; 66 of these rooms are in Domestic/Sexual Violence Shelters. This year, during cold weather months (2017-2018), there were an additional 179 beds and 5 rooms of seasonal shelter capacity – approximately an 80% increase in bed capacity.¹

Data for the recently completed season is not yet available. In the previous season (2016-2017), warming shelters funded by DCF sheltered:

- 587 adults and 15 children (602 total persons),
- approximately 70% men,

¹ This includes some year-round and seasonal shelters that do not receive funding through DCF.

- Spectrum's 8 beds of seasonal shelter for youth in Chittenden County;
- Anew Place's 20 beds of emergency shelter for adults; and
- Upper Valley Haven's 12 beds of seasonal shelter for adults.

- 154 adults (26%) experiencing chronic homelessness,
- 174 adults (30%) with severe mental illness, and
- 157 adults (27%) with chronic substance abuse.

Preliminary reporting from this year suggests that more people were served by warming shelters. The Barre/Montpelier area added capacity and served more persons, as expected.

Warming shelters consistently report significant challenges in serving an increasing number of guests with severe mental illness. This is very difficult to accommodate in congregate shelter, even with access to trained mental health staff. The intensity of service need is significant and beyond what many warming shelters are able to provide. Emergency shelters, and in particular warming shelters, are the “last line of defense” for individuals unserved by other resources. For this reason, many work to avoid exiting guests. Some shelters work with police or guests are taken to the emergency room, when behavior warrants. Even in these cases, guests often return to the shelter and the cycle repeats.

Warming shelters usually offer shelter only during the evening and overnight. Warm, safe, welcoming space during daytime hours is offered in partnership with community centers or day shelters. Adequate daytime capacity remains a significant need in many communities where shelters lack the staffing, facilities and financial resources to provide shelter during the day.

Warming shelters express concern about the lack of staffing and crisis bed capacity at local designated mental health agencies. Permanent supportive housing resources needed to sponsor individuals in long-term in community-based permanent housing are inadequate in every local community, as evidenced by community-wide waiting lists. Even where adequate vouchers exist, sponsoring services are often unavailable or clients are not eligible for available services.

Respectfully,

Sarah Phillips

Director

Office of Economic Opportunity