
**Report to
The Vermont Legislature**

**Annual Report on
General Assistance Program Recommendations**

In Accordance with 2016 Act 131 Sec. 9 (H.845)

**Submitted to: House Appropriations Committee
House General Housing and Military Affairs
House Human Services
Senate Appropriations Committee
Senate Health and Welfare**

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Department for Children and Families**

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Report Date: January 15, 2017



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Executive Summary

Per the 2016 Act 131 Section 9 concerning the General & Emergency Assistance Program:

“On or before January 15 of each year, the Commissioner for Children and Families shall submit a written report to the House Committees on Appropriations, on General, Housing and Military Affairs and on Human Services and the Senate Committees on Appropriations and on Health and Welfare containing:

- (1) an evaluation of the General Assistance program during the previous fiscal year;
- (2) any recommendations for changes to the program; and
- (3) a plan for continued implementation of the program.

Part I: Program Overview

The General & Emergency Assistance (GA) Program strives to assist the most vulnerable Vermonters by providing basic needs in times of crisis. The program strives to ensure that no Vermont individual or family without resources will slip through the network of possibilities for assistance. GA benefits include Personal Needs and Incidentals (PNI), a cash assistance benefit; help with utilities and fuel; apartment and room rental assistance; emergency housing through the GA Community Investments initiative and motel voucher program; emergency medical care, durable medical equipment, and emergency dental benefits; and financial assistance with the disposition of remains (GA Burial). With few exceptions, intake and eligibility for GA benefits is determined in each of the Economic Services Division’s (ESD) twelve district offices. In most cases, applications must be made in person at a district office. Exceptions include those needing accommodations, after hours for emergency housing, or those requesting burial benefits.

The GA Program also administers the Vermont Rental Subsidy (VRS) Program, a state-funded initiative providing rental assistance to Vermont households whose monthly income would otherwise be insufficient to afford the cost of renting in their communities. Participants pay a set percentage (30%) of their gross income towards their rental costs and the State of Vermont pays the difference to the apartment owner in the form of a monthly check. As a participant’s income increases, their share of the rent obligation increases and the State’s share is reduced proportionally, much in the way a federal Section 8 rental subsidy is managed. Eligibility for VRS is made in ESD Central Office.

Part II: Evaluation of the Previous Fiscal Year

FY16 showed significant progress decreasing the emergency housing budget which has been problematic for years. Overall spending on emergency housing was down significantly relative to the previous fiscal year. Over the course of FY15, ESD spent approximately \$4.3 million on emergency housing motels, whereas FY16 saw a total expenditure of approximately \$3.2 million on motels. This shift is encouraging. While FY16 was helped by a milder winter, the positive impact of community-based alternatives to GA motels should not be underestimated. This year’s full cold weather season and expanded GA Community Investments will provide additional data for analysis.

Implementation of GA Community Investments, community-based alternatives to the GA motel voucher program, was the biggest shift in administration of emergency housing benefits . In August 2015, DCF issued a memo inviting community-based organizations to offer proposals for alternative crisis bed capacity and service delivery models to decrease reliance on motels to meet emergency shelter needs. DCF provided data on GA motel voucher usage by district and eligibility for the previous year, met with local homeless Continua of Care, answered questions and provided technical assistance based on the AHS adopted Family Connections framework from the US Interagency Council on Homelessness. All proposals were required to meet DCF shelter standards as well as form a close referral partnership with the local Economic Services Division office. GA Community Investments are funded through the GA Emergency Housing budget and administered through the Office of Economic Opportunity as amendments to community partner Housing Opportunity Program grants.

For FY16, DCF awarded a total of \$788,544 in grants to 11 organizations providing community-based solutions to meet the emergency housing needs of Vermonters. These grants were used to increase the availability of seasonal warming shelters; add capacity to emergency shelters; add short-term transitional housing and services for homeless families with children in apartments; address emergency housing for youth; and address emergency housing and services for victims fleeing violence. Not only has this strategy of community investments shown promising signs of decreasing spending, it has also offered communities and Vermonters a better, more service-based means of addressing homelessness across the state.

Of particular note is a pilot alternative in Brattleboro which began in January. This provides the local domestic violence shelter, the Women’s Freedom Center, with a pool of funds to provide shelter overflow in motels rather than refer those fleeing domestic or sexual violence to ESD to GA emergency housing motel vouchers. In this way, the Women’s Freedom Center can screen, shelter, and offer services directly to clients rather than refer those in crisis to the local ESD office. Access to advocacy and support services has helped reduce the length of stay in motels for victims in Brattleboro and has provided a stronger connection to the services offered by the Center. Instead of staying in a motel room with a GA emergency housing voucher for 84 days without services, survivors receiving shelter through the Women’s Freedom Center are immediately connected to services and have an average length of stay of 14 days. This is a clear indicator of the effectiveness of the shift in shelter and service delivery which represents dramatically reduced spending on emergency motels, and dramatically better service delivery for the client.

Despite encouraging signs in many areas, challenges remained. Motel usage in some regions of the state, particularly the Rutland area, continued to be high. DCF is working through multiple avenues to understand and address the potential causes of high motel utilization. Through this work, a new Rutland GA Community Investment is being put in place in FY17 to shift the domestic violence pool to the Rutland County Women’s Network (RCWN).

Part III: Recommendation for Changes to the Program

As we approach the halfway point of the fiscal year, we see three avenues to affect positive changes to the GA Program:

- 1. Expansion of the GA Community Investments** – FY15 saw a roll out of the GA Community Investments with limited funds for about one half of the fiscal year. FY16 has seen a dramatic

expansion of the scope of this shift. Although there will likely always be a need for some emergency motel usage, we strongly recommend pursuing the continued implementation and expansion of this initiative. The GA Community Investments have shown preliminary cost savings and represents stronger and more effective public policy. Critically, it also highlights the importance of leveraging communities and local agencies to identify and address the most appropriate and effective strategies for addressing homelessness locally.

- 2. Examine and address PNI utilization and spending** – PNI is a benefit that offers \$56 per month for qualifying individuals. This benefit was originally intended to provide short-term cash assistance for individuals temporarily in crisis or who are awaiting Social Security disability application determination. Over time, an “ongoing” population of PNI recipients who may be accessing these benefits for many months, even years has developed. Although the benefit itself is not large per person, the aggregation of the length of time has begun to create upward pressures on the PNI portion of the GA benefit. More importantly, the existence of “ongoing” PNI points to a more significant systemic concern as to whether there is a better model for delivering emergency cash benefits to those needing this form of assistance. In the past, individuals in receipt of PNI were offered case management services through a relationship with Vocational Rehabilitation and community partners. The program had many positive attributes, and may inform future changes. Case management services that target individuals with a capacity for increased employment or that help individuals successfully apply for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) could decrease the length of time people receive PNI. At the same time, the model also offers individuals a more complete, helpful service that encourages and empowers transition to a more appropriate and sustainable income source.
- 3. Expansion of the VRS Program** – 84 days in a motel through the GA emergency housing benefit costs as much as 365 days of rental assistance through VRS. The program has been a success by many metrics, and has vocal supporters in Vermont’s advocacy community, the nonprofit housing world, and in many levels State government. In its inception and current iteration, VRS primarily serves family households (many of whom are enrolled in Reach Up). We believe it is time to consider the creation of a new component of VRS that focuses on single individuals. This is an opportunity to expand rapid rehousing benefits to include populations such as single households in receipt of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or seniors experiencing homelessness. In conversations with local Housing Review Teams, the concern for how to help these populations has emerged as a dominant theme.

Part IV: Plan for Continued Implementation of the Program

For the remainder of FY16 into FY17, the GA program intends to continue to make GA Community Investments. For FY17, DCF awarded a total of \$1,562,283 in grants to 15 different organization in 9 counties which is double the investment made in FY16. This ramped up scale and scope will provide an opportunity to measure the progress being made reducing motel spending and the implementation of a much more effective and humane service model for emergency housing. We also continue to work with local domestic violence organizations to expand their capacity to serve those fleeing domestic/sexual violence directly, rather than by referral to GA emergency housing at ESD. We are particularly interested in how this will work with our newest pilot projects in Rutland and Bennington.

The General Assistance Program is more than emergency housing benefits. While there has been a need to focus on housing, we are also keenly aware of the importance and necessity of evaluating *all* aspects of the program. To that end, we are engaged in a detailed examination of the program's components and processes. The GA Team is committed to continued improvement of the administration of the program to benefit ESD district staff and, most importantly, the clients seeking assistance.

Conclusion

Over the course of FY15, ESD spent approximately \$4.3 million on emergency housing motels, whereas FY16 saw a total expenditure of approximately \$3.2 million on motels. We believe this reduction in spending is a result of community-based emergency housing alternatives. In FY16, DCF awarded a total of \$788,544 in grants to 11 organizations to provide community-based solutions for emergency housing needs. For FY17, DCF awarded a total of \$1,562,283 in grants to 15 different organization in 9 counties doubling FY16's investment.

Beyond seeing a decline in overall motel usage and therefore less spending because of these community-based housing alternatives, we are also seeing a dramatic decline in lengths of stay for domestic violence victims seeking housing. By partnering with domestic violence centers to create service-based emergency housing alternatives, victims' lengths of stay have reduced from 84 days to approximately 14 days. This represents a significant reduction in spending and indicates that service-based efforts are creating a positive impact. Due to this, a GA Community Investment is coming online in Rutland as a partnership with the Rutland County Women's Network (RCWN); there is a second possible project as well.

When we look at the General Assistance Program however, we need to look beyond housing. This report lists the following recommendations that will progressively move the program forward: expansion of the GA Community Investments; examination of PNI utilization and spending; and expansion of the VRS Program. There has been much accomplished in GA over the past year and a half. Although there is much to be proud of, we are acutely aware that there is work yet to be done. We will continue to improve delivery of benefits while helping those in crisis achieve the stability they need from day-to-day.