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

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**GENERAL ASSISTANCE EMERGENCY HOUSING REPORTS**

**In Accordance with 33 V.S.A. 2115**

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

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**Report Date:** September 1, 2018



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## Executive Summary

The General and Emergency Assistance (GA) Program is now at a crossroads. The Department for Children and Families has announced an initiative to update and improve the GA Program, bringing it in line with a more efficient, trauma-informed approach to serving those in crisis. As evidenced by the January 2018 Point-in-Time (PIT) Count, homelessness continues to be a significant challenge for Vermont, and poverty continues to be a significant challenge for Vermont. Even with successful implementation of alternative programs to motels, the number of applications for GA emergency housing continues to increase relative to FY16 and FY17, causing budgetary challenges to persist across the range of services offered by the program. Encouragingly, though, GA Community Investments continue to prove their value as alternatives to the GA motel voucher program. The GA Program saw mixed results during FY18 – facing ongoing fiscal pressures but also embracing an exciting opportunity for evolution.

## Evaluation of GA Program during FY18

Administered by the Economic Services Division (ESD), the GA Program is designed to serve as the State's program of last resort. It is an emergency financial assistance program providing the basic necessities of life when those needs cannot be met by any other assistance program within the Department for Children and Families (DCF). In this regard, it remains an important service to Vermonters as well as a key component of Vermont's system of care.

The GA program continues to face challenging budgetary and utilization demands. Pressure points include:

- *Personal Needs*: This benefit category includes Personal Needs Income, Rent, and Room Rent. There have been continuing upward pressures in the area of Personal Needs, and it remains an area for consideration.
- *Support Services*: The GA Burial benefit continues to experience increased utilization. Although the average age of the decedent is only 58 years old, we have significant concerns that Vermont's aging population will serve to put additional pressures on this resource over the coming years.
- *Emergency Housing*: Consistent with the past few years, GA Emergency Housing (Vulnerable Population, Catastrophic, and Adverse Weather Conditions) again encountered utilization pressures, straining spending. Over the past three fiscal years, the GA program has seen a steady upward trend in the numbers of households and applications for the program. These pressures indicate that homelessness still is a significant area of concern in Vermont. The 2018 Point-In-Time (PIT) Count data showed an overall increase in homelessness across the state.<sup>1</sup> The Coordinated Entry system being implemented across Vermont holds potential to improve service delivery and better understand the needs of those households facing housing crises. ESD has signed on as a referral

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<sup>1</sup> <http://helpingtohousevt.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/2018-PIT-Report-FINAL-5-30-18.pdf>

partner to Coordinated Entry and has also taken steps to ensure that its programs begin engaging as fully as possible with this emerging system.

<b><i>GA Temp Housing</i></b>	<b><i>FY 2016</i></b>	<b><i>FY 2017</i></b>	<b><i>FY 2018</i></b>
<i># Applications</i>	13,262	15,084	17,882
<i># Applications Granted</i>	8,697	10,082	11,781
<i>Unduplicated Utilization</i>	2,117	2,289	2,494

In 2015, DCF made a significant shift by increasing investments from the GA program into community-based initiatives. These GA Community Investments provide funding to community providers who implement flexible, community-based alternatives to the motel voucher system. These projects serve clients in need of emergency housing and contribute towards a reduction in motel spending by the State. Over the past three years, the DCF Housing Team has seen marked success by many projects. In FY18, just over \$1.9 million of GA funds supported Community Investments in nine communities around the state.

Seasonal warming shelters are an effective use of GA emergency housing funds in many regions. This model can provide more cost-effective emergency housing and a critical service connection for clients. In FY18, GA funds supported seasonal warming shelters in Brattleboro, Burlington, Barre, Middlebury, and St. Johnsbury. Good Samaritan Haven (Washington County) managed an additional 33 beds of seasonal shelter capacity this season, serving a total of 219 unduplicated adults at all four of its locations. Safe Harbor in Burlington successfully operated its behavior-based warming shelter again, serving 184 adults. However, it is important to note that a seasonal warming shelter is not the appropriate approach to addressing homelessness in all communities nor for all people experiencing homelessness.

We have also seen excellent results from GA Community Investments operated by domestic violence advocate organizations. New Story Center in Rutland, Women’s Freedom Center in Brattleboro, and PAVE in Bennington all operated models in which they, as the community partner, manage additional shelter capacity and operate their own motel pool for shelter overflow. Notably, these community investments reduced the length of stay relative to the GA motel voucher system while also providing more comprehensive supports for clients. The maximum duration of grant for clients experiencing domestic violence as served through GA emergency housing is 84 nights. New Story Center, Women’s Freedom Center, and PAVE averaged under 20 days. We strongly encourage continued replication of these models as funding allows.

## Recommendations for Changes to the Program

Since its creation in 1967, GA has become an increasingly tangled, bureaucratic program with overly complicated rules, processes, and procedures. Policy and practice decisions have been made with the best of intentions but there is lack of an overarching, cohesive policy vision.

Over the past two years, Departmental leadership, the GA Program Director, and GA Team have been rethinking the way we deliver General Assistance. Beginning in the autumn of 2016, the GA Team reviewed the program, its policies, and its procedures including visits to every district office. This complete analysis looked at how the program could be updated and modernized within its current budget.

In early February 2018, the Commissioner issued a public memorandum notifying advocates and community partners about the work to restructure the GA Program. The goal is to design and implement an intentional program that is simpler for clients to understand and access, as well as for ESD District Office staff to administer. We propose to do that by:

- 1) **Eliminating the overly complicated parts of the current program.** The GA program has only three pages of governing statute (VSA Title 33, Chapter 21) and has 165 pages of rules and a 160-page training binder. The program has become increasingly complicated while still having rules that are contradictory or silent when they should not be. Currently, eligibility for GA benefits is “categorical” (i.e., what is a client’s problem and does it meet the definition of what is considered to be an emergency). If a client meets categorical eligibility, they are subsequently screened for financial eligibility. That financial eligibility, however, varies from benefit to benefit. We propose to make eligibility for GA based on economic distress and an emergent need. This enables GA to be a financial program that mitigates economic distress through financial assistance, stabilizing clients while allowing room and space for partners to address the root crisis.
- 2) **Providing support and benefits that actively help clients.** Although the current program does require “tasks” for clients to remain eligible for GA benefits, feedback from staff and clients is that the tasks are not always helpful for moving clients towards self-sufficiency. Moreover, ESD assigns those tasks to clients – they are requirements placed by ESD on clients so that they can receive their next assistance. In the new framework, we propose that ESD staff work with clients to identify their social service needs and connect clients with the appropriate partners. This may come in the form of referrals, making appointments for clients, or as warm handoffs in some cases.
- 3) **Respecting the limited bandwidths of clients and staff.** Clients applying for GA are by definition experiencing a crisis. Additionally, though, they may also have experienced trauma, been exposed to toxic stress, have numerous Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), or have been affected by generational poverty and scarcity. As such, the re-design of the GA Program needs to acknowledge that our clients are coming to ESD with – in behavioral science terms – limited, narrow bandwidth. Likewise, staff sit down with clients experiencing crisis, trauma, etc. and spend a significant amount of time contemplating and determining complex eligibility, manual processes, and byzantine rules. As a result, the bandwidth of many of those staff is taken up by navigating the eligibility for the program. In many cases, this has resulted in a transactional relationship between clients and ESD

rather than a relationship predicated on how best to help. We propose that simplifying the GA program eligibility and rules will provide the opportunities for staff to focus more time on clients and coordinating services.

- 4) **Exercising fiscal responsibility.** The GA restructure is contemplated as cost-neutral. We propose that we overhaul the program within its current budget by rearranging the pieces, be efficient with resources, and thinking creatively about how we serve Vermonters in need.

A number of resources and policies informed the core components of the re-design of GA:

- The AHS Trauma Policy
- The key principles outlined by Ideas42 in “**Poverty Interrupted**” ([http://www.ideas42.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/I42\\_PovertyWhitePaper\\_Digital\\_FINAL-1.pdf](http://www.ideas42.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/I42_PovertyWhitePaper_Digital_FINAL-1.pdf)), Allison Daminger, Jonathan Hayes, Anthony Barrows, and Josh Wright, 2015). This seminal research suggests that social service programs should employ three main design principles that help reframe traditional approaches to helping clients:
  - 1) Reduce costs,
  - 2) Create breathing room for clients and staff to focus on solutions, and
  - 3) Reframe and empower.
- **Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much** (Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir, 2013) informed the attention paid to bandwidth and tunneling
- ESD also had the pleasure of hosting two staff from Ideas42 this spring. They provided an overview of behavioral science and scarcity as well as more nuts and bolts training on the behavioral science around planning and goal setting for clients. The representatives from Ideas42 were impressed with the initiative, and we hope to continue a relationship with that rich resource over the course of the GA Restructure.

### **Plan for Continued Implementation of the Program**

The GA Restructure is a work in progress. ESD, with the help of the Commissioner’s Office, has developed and implemented a very intentional, transparent public process. That process includes extensive conversations with ESD District Office staff, client focus groups in all twelve ESD District office services areas, community conversations, and meetings with key service provider stakeholders prior to the drafting of new rules. We believe this process will not only deepen relationships with our community partners but also ensure that we create the best revamped program possible. The target implementation date for the new GA Program has been set at July 1, 2019. However, there is also an acknowledgment that the target could be pushed further back as necessary in order to accommodate any unforeseen delays. Once new rules are drafted, the focus will shift to crafting and executing a comprehensive change management plan.

While the Restructure moves forward, ESD is operating the current state of GA consistent with current rules and procedures.

## Emergency Housing Data Collection Processes

The 12 ESD district offices collect the following data daily and submit a weekly spreadsheet to ESD central office for a monthly and year-to-date statewide 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 requests/number granted
- Number of categorically-eligible vulnerable population requests/number granted
- Number of eligible vulnerable points requests/number granted
- Total number of nights authorized/average cost per night/total cost for authorized nights
- Number of Adverse Weather Condition (AWC) grants/number of adults granted under AWC/number of children granted under AWC
- Number of AWC nights authorized/average cost per night/total cost for AWC nights authorized

The above data are collected manually in the district and central offices as DCF's ACCESS system is not designed to collect this data. Payments for emergency housing are made based on motel billing through ESD authorization forms. Once billing is received from a motel by ESD, 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.

Over the course of FY18, ESD has been pursuing entrance into the Vermont Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). VT HMIS is the statewide data collection and storage tool for client-level data and services to households experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness. The Agency of Human Services and Department have directed ESD to use the Vermont HMIS system mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and implemented by both Continuum of Care in Vermont. Participation in HMIS will 1) provide more accurate data, a function critical for making informed policy and budgetary decisions; 2) benefit the Continuum of Care's statewide applications for competitive HUD funding ; and 3) allow ESD to more productively participate in the statewide Coordinated Entry system of care and service provision.

## Statistics and Data

A summary of emergency housing requests, including catastrophic and vulnerable populations, for the period of July 2017 to June 2018 follows:

- **17,880** emergency housing applications were received, of these:
  - **11,781** were granted; **6099** were denied.
  - **8,283** singles were granted; **4,839** singles were denied.

- **3,498** families were granted; **1,260** families were denied.
  - **13,593 adults in households** were granted.
  - **5,895 children in households** were granted.
  - **2,768** applications were found eligible under the catastrophic criteria.
  - **1,937** applications were found eligible under the vulnerable population criteria.
  - **65** applications were found eligible under vulnerable points (see eligibility criteria).
- 43,167** bed nights were paid for at an average cost of **\$75.85/night**.
- 8,602** bed nights were contracted through Harbor Place.

### Adverse Weather Conditions

Per the Legislature for FY18, Adverse Weather Conditions (AWC) replaced Cold Weather Exception (CWE). The first AWC night for this period occurred on November 7. There were a total of 135 AWC nights during the fiscal year – low ambient air temperature was the most prevalent factor followed by wind chill readings lower than 20 degrees Fahrenheit and then the chance of precipitation greater than 50% with a temperature less than 32 degrees Fahrenheit. This represents an increase from FY17 which only saw a total of 108 days of CWE. A little over one third of approved applications for emergency housing were done so under AEC, amounting to an estimated total spend of \$818,896.

### Conclusion

FY18 was a pivotal year for the GA Program, a year marking points of transition and change for a program in need of modernization. This marks the beginning of a substantial departure from the historical GA Program towards a reconceptualized vision of how the State of Vermont might better serve those Vermonters in crisis and in need of emergency assistance through ESD. We believe that by embracing the possibility of change, we can create an invaluable opportunity – through deliberate process, thoughtful dialogue, and solicitation of feedback – to create and run a more effective, more compassionate, less bureaucratic program for Vermonters seeking emergency assistance.



## APPENDIX A: Aggregate GA Housing (July 2017 – June 2018)

### Housing Applications

Total # Housing Request	# Housing Requests Granted	# Housing Requests Denied	# Households without Children Granted	# Households without Children Denied	# Households with Children Granted	# Households with Children Denied	Total # Adults Granted	Total # Children Granted
17,880	11,781	6,099	8,283	4,839	3,498	1,260	13,593	5,895

### Granted Housing Categories

# Catastrophic Grants	# Vulnerable Population Grants	# Vulnerable Points Grants	# Fair Hearing Officer Ordered Grants	# AWC Grants
2,768	1,937	65	2	7,009

### Estimated Housing Costs

# of Non AWC Uncontracted Nights Granted	Non AWC Average Cost Per Night	Non AWC Estimated Total Costs	# of AWC Uncontracted Nights Granted	AWC Average Cost Per Night	AWC Estimated Total Costs	Combined # Uncontracted Nights Granted	Combined Estimated Total Costs
31,721	\$75.43	\$2,321,523	11,446	\$76.27	\$818,893	43,167	\$3,140,419

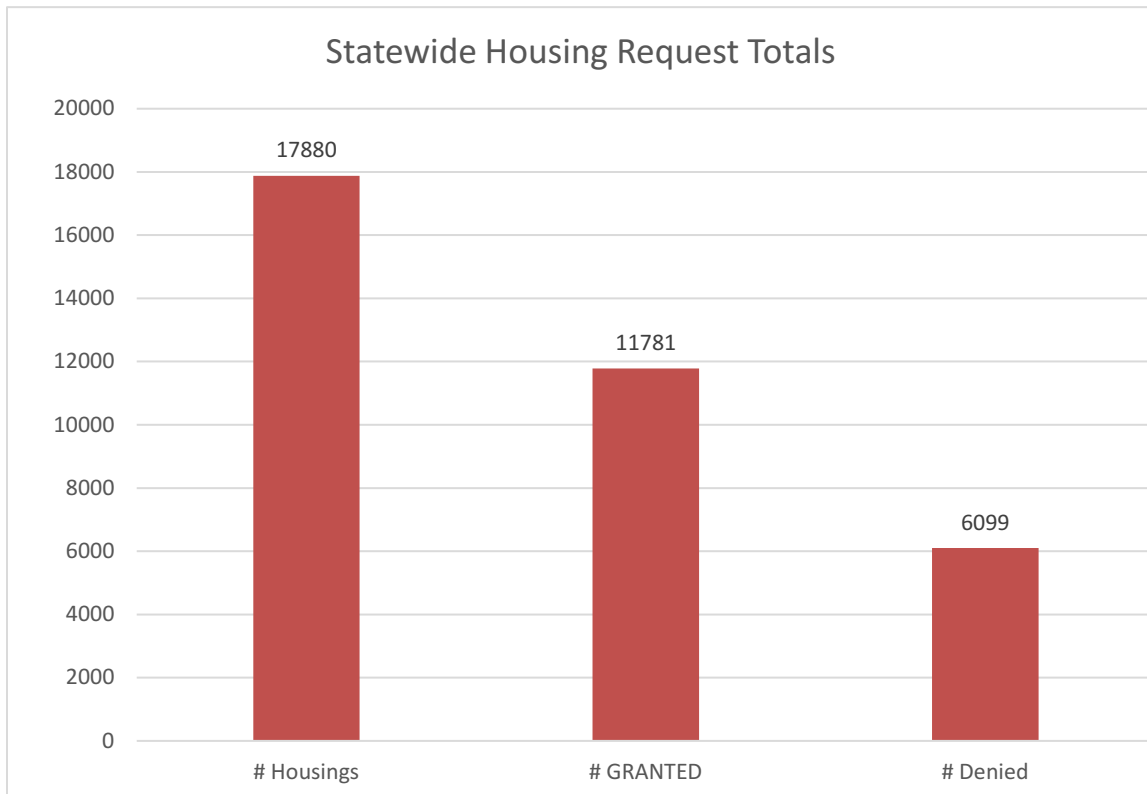
- Total # of Harbor Place Nights: 9,597
- Total # of AWC Harbor Place Nights: 995
- “uncontracted nights” denote those exclusive of the Harbor Place contract

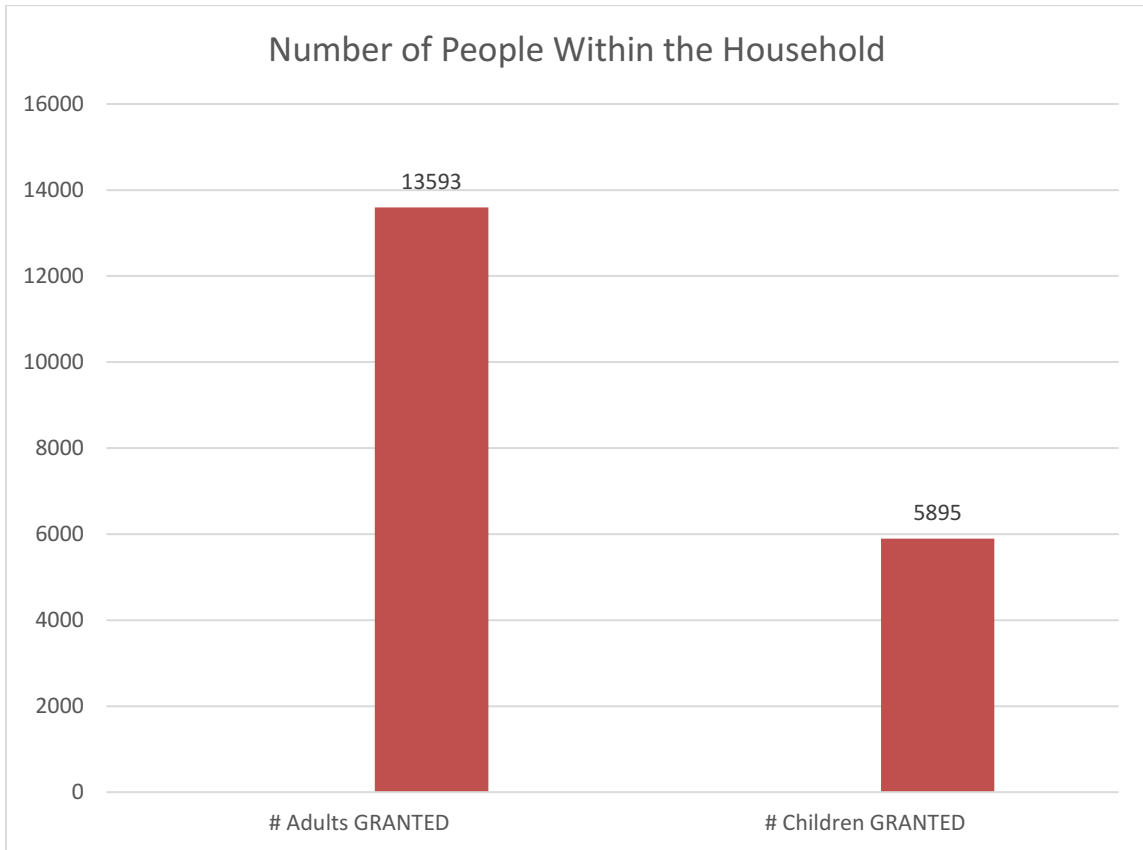
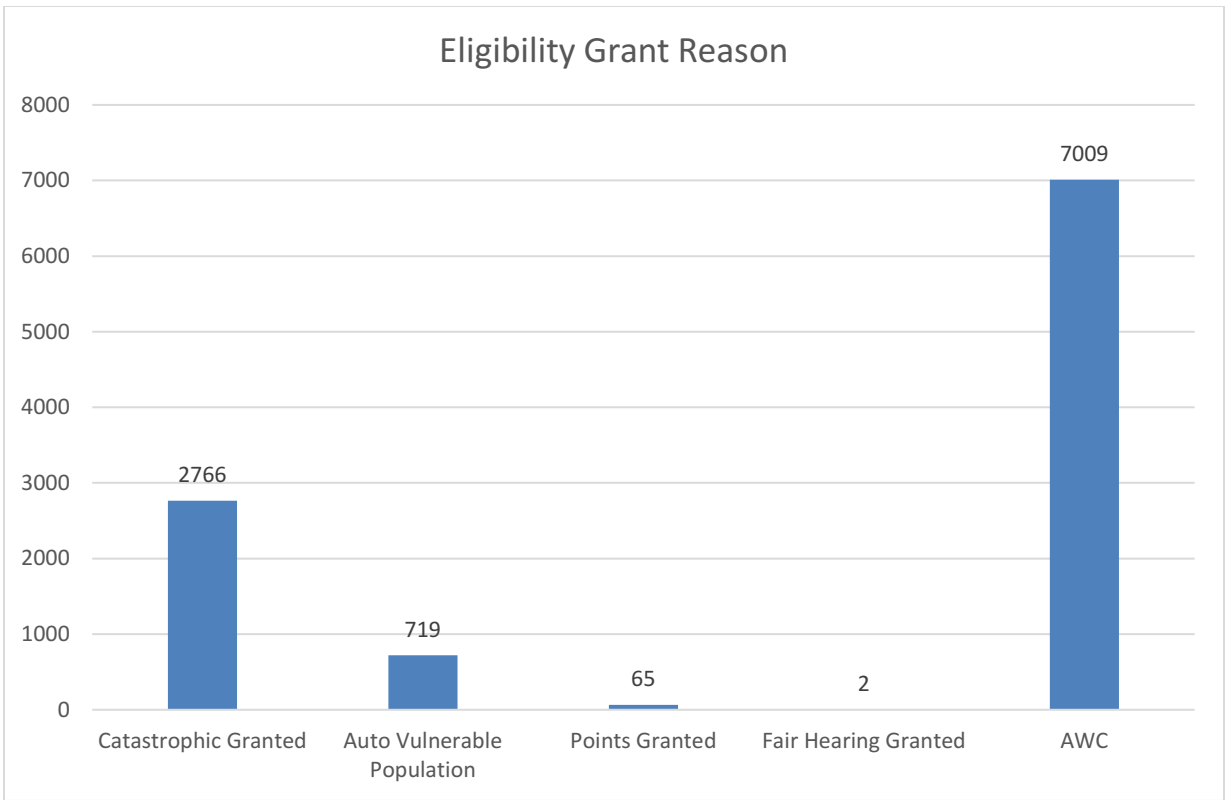
## APPENDIX B: GA Housing Denial Data (July 2017 - June 2018)

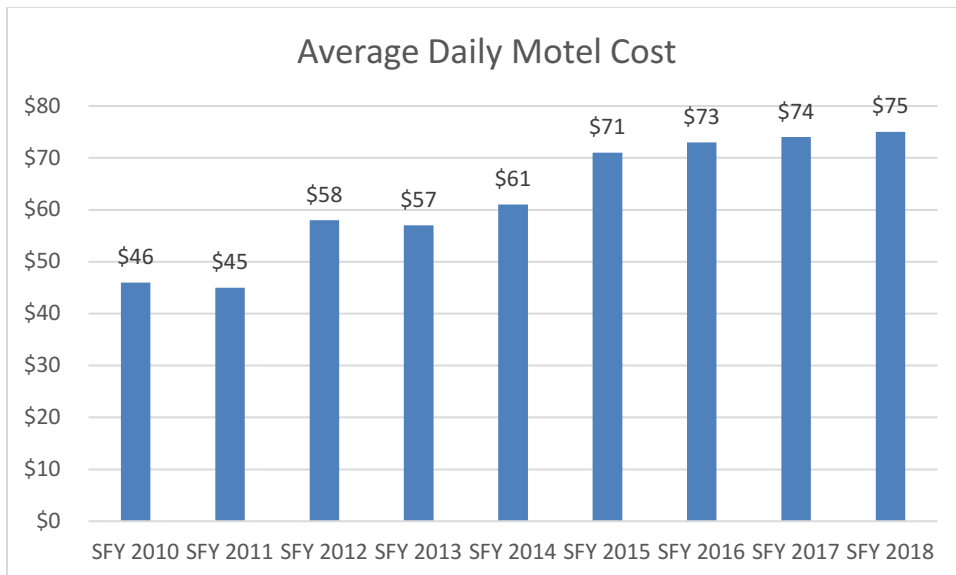
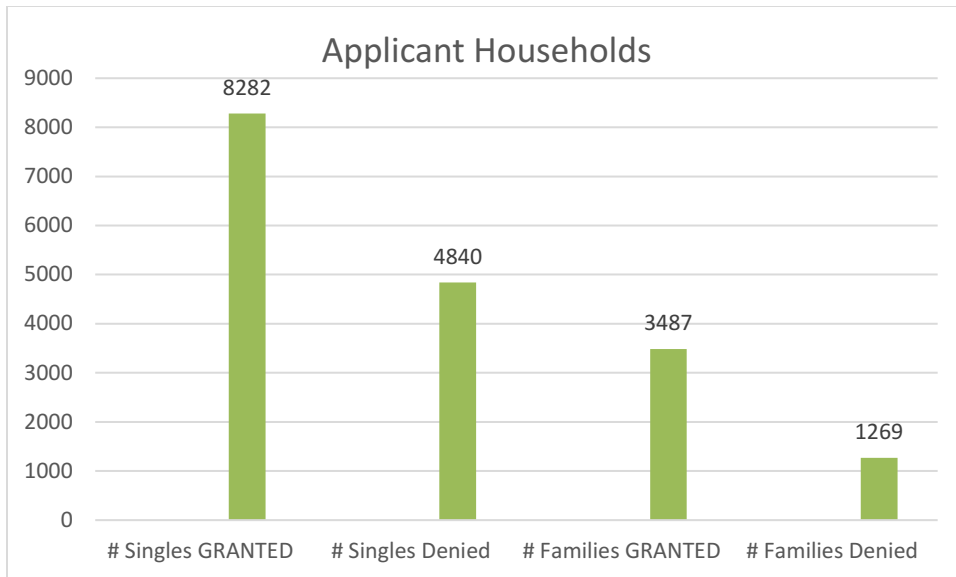
July 2017 - June 2018 GA/EA Denials							
Total Denied Applications							
6,099							
Households with Adults ONLY			Households with Child(ren)				
4,839			79%				
1,260			21%				
Top 5 Denial Reasons			Top 5 Denial Reasons				
1	Has Other Housing Options	1,586	33%	1	Has Other Housing Options	412	33%
2	Ineligible	1,491	31%	2	Ineligible	223	18%
3	Verification Required	399	8%	3	Caused Own Homelessness	167	13%
4	No Interview	283	6%	4	Verification Required	141	11%
5	Caused Own Homelessness	264	5%	5	Has Available Resources	122	10%

## APPENDIX C: GA Housing Data Tables (Statewide: July 2017 – June 2018)

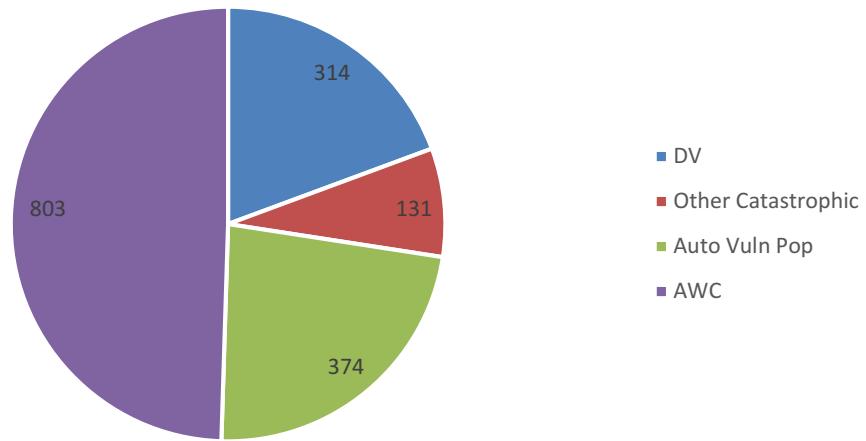
### Statewide Temporary Housing Data for July 2017 – June 2018





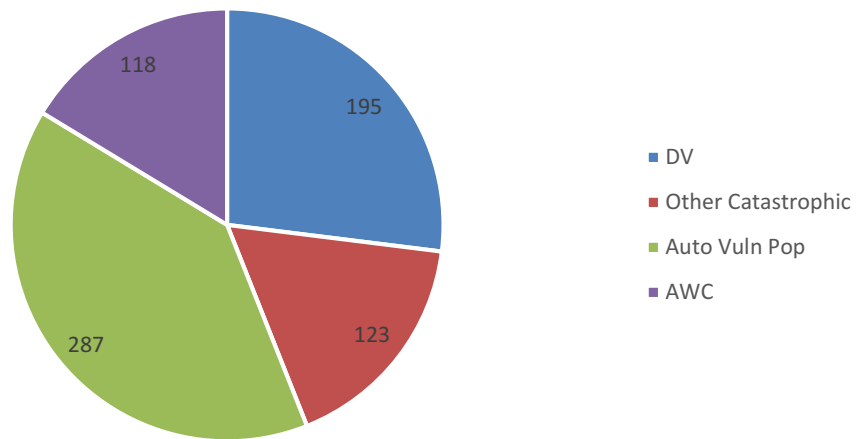


### GA/EA Temporary Housing Unduplicated Single Household Case Count



- Total Points: 13 Household
- Fair Hearing: 0 Households

### GA/EA Temporary Housing Unduplicated Family Household Case Count



- Total Points: 7 Households
- Fair Hearing: 0 Households

