



VERMONT COALITION OF RUNAWAY
& HOMELESS YOUTH PROGRAMS

Legislative Testimony: COVID-19 impacts on Runaway and Homeless Youth and Providers
March 31, 2020
Bethany Pombar, Director

Thank you for the opportunity to speak about the impacts of the public health crisis on VCRHYP services and the young people we are supporting. A brief reminder of our scope of work; VCRHYP is a coalition of 12 members and partners who provide housing, shelter and crisis supports to youth between the ages of 12 and 24.

I am listed under “residential programs” section on your agenda today. We have three sites providing transitional housing services to older youth in congregate settings, and one of those sites also provides services to runaway and homeless minors, and youth in DCF custody in a congregate setting. One other site provides congregate emergency shelter for older youth. Our other agencies are providing housing to young people in scattered site apartments, host homes, and through a rapid rehousing voucher program that we just launched. I will take the opportunity to include the challenges they are facing as well.

Current state of operations:

All of our transitional housing program sites are still operational and those sites who used a scattered site model and had openings are still accepting new clients. Transitional Housing sites that were congregate are taking youth in on a case-by case basis, using screening tools to assess risk, but concerned about their inability to isolate youth for 14 days to limit exposure to other clients. Measures have been taken to increase disinfectant and protective protocols in shared spaces. Isolation or quarantine in these units would mean a client is confined to their bedroom, but there is still a shared bathroom and kitchen, so it is not ideal.

Rapid Rehousing vouchers are still being issued and we are able to get referrals from the coordinated entry system, but some youth are having a hard time getting necessary income verification from employers who aren't available right now, or don't have access to documentation. Housing search is also complicated as landlords limit exposure, and if a unit needs work to pass the high level Housing Quality Standards Inspection – finding electricians and contractors can cause delays. Wherever possible, VCRHYP is extending deadlines and working with funders to address new complications.

Our emergency shelter for minors is primarily provided by a network of host homes, which are community members who share their home with youth in need for up to 21-days at a time.

This network is compromised across the state right now, operating at about 60% capacity. Many host homes were empty-nest parents who now find themselves living with their children again, or they Vermonters who are self-isolating and have stepped back from shelter provision. Agencies who aren't able to shelter a minor are working with the youth and family to identify other options and still providing family reunification services.

Agencies are working closely with their local Continuums of Care to address individual youth needs and seek alternative housing for youth in congregate settings, including putting protocols in place around moving a symptomatic client into recovery beds and exploring using hotels for 2-week isolation stays before moving into a congregate setting. We would like to take a second to thank our partners at OEO for their incredible efforts to respond to emergent needs and put resources in place.

Direct impacts on youth and young adults:

Starting late last week, our agencies began experiencing increased referrals for services. Young people who were struggling before have exacerbated challenges now and are losing housing. We are seeing an increase in calls both from minors who are in-place with their families but who have heightened conflict as the pressures of the pandemic take their toll, and young adults who were struggling to live independently without adequate resources before, and who are now some of the first to be laid off from their jobs or kicked out of a home where they were couch surfing.

For youth that are in care already, VCRHYP is fielding requests for emergency supports to respond to their new needs, needs which are often unsupported by our funders, like medicine, phones and data or minutes for them, food, cleaning supplies, and wifi so they can still participate in their education. We anticipate that as the pandemic continues to unfold, these concrete supports will continue to emerge.

We are also worried about longer term move-on strategies- when will youth will be able to exit services? All of our housing supports for older youth are time-limited and depending on the length and severity of the crisis, and unfolding economic repercussions, young adults may not be able to rebuild resources before their length of stay is up, and currently there are no permanent housing move-on preferences from VSHA for youth served in VCRHYP's Rapid Rehousing project.

Impacts on financial stability of providers:

Like all small employers right now, our non-profits are worried about the long-term financial impacts. Reserve and unrestricted funds are being eaten up by paying for increased tech needs of remotely working staff, stocking up on supplies and food to support youth in care, paying for hotels or additional housing units that weren't budgeted for to accommodate isolation and quarantine needs, and continuing to pay staff wages while "billable" services decrease. With unobligated funds going to unanticipated concrete costs, some agencies are becoming worried

about being able to meet match requirements for federal partners, or about drawing down full contract amounts if they don't meet targets.

We are in early days of this pandemic still and some of the longer-term impacts are yet to be revealed. We thank your committee for your attention now, and look forward to ongoing opportunities to evaluate impact.