
**Report to
The Vermont Legislature**

**Report on CRF for
Housing for Households Experiencing Homelessness**

In Accordance with 2020 Act 137 (H.966), Sec. 12

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

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Report Date: August 15, 2020



Coronavirus Relief Funding Report:
Housing for Households Experiencing Homelessness

Per 2020 Act 137 (H.966), Sec. 12, the Department for Children and Families was allocated \$16 million in Coronavirus Relief Funding (CRF) *“to fund programs and services that support, safe, stable housing opportunities for Vermont households experiencing homelessness as a result of the COVID-19 public health emergency and related administrative costs”*.

The Department’s programs were reviewed by Guidehouse and funds were released in late July.

Programs and services funded by this appropriation include:

- 1) Expansion of the Vermont Rental Subsidy program to provide homeless households with temporary rental assistance through December 30, 2020 as a bridge to public housing vouchers.

The Department anticipates issuing rental assistance subsidies through the Vermont Rental Subsidy program for 100 families on Reach Up and currently staying in a motel paid for through the Department for Children and Families (DCF) General Assistance Emergency Housing Program. Housing case management for these households will be provided by Reach Up Case Managers. Rental assistance will continue for up to 12 months, with the ability to bridge to a public housing voucher after nine months of successful tenancy.

In addition, the Department will launch a statewide Rapid Re-housing Voucher project with approximately \$6 million from Vermont’s HUD Emergency Solutions Grant CARES allocation. This project will provide approximately 375 12-month rental assistance vouchers for households experiencing homelessness statewide. Vouchers will be made available through the local homeless Continua of Care, allocated based on current rates of General Assistance emergency housing utilization. Vouchers may be able to extend up to 18 months. The project will also support approximately 20 new, full-time housing case managers to work with families, liaise with landlords, and support housing retention activities. The Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity will administer rental assistance payments statewide. Applications will be available mid-August, with rental assistance available as early as September.

Combined, these “rapid re-housing” projects will provide approximately 475 total households experiencing homelessness with housing support services and temporary rental assistance. Households will exit the program successfully as they increase their income to afford market rate rent or because they have been able to bridge to a public housing voucher through the Vermont State Housing Authority or a local public housing authority.

The availability of public housing vouchers remains a significant risk factor for this initiative. As is usually the case, attrition through housing authorities will not be enough to absorb all project participants. In addition, the ability to locate housing units will remain a critical factor in the success of this initiative. Low vacancy rates across Vermont are expected to delay lease up for households even when they have secured rental assistance. The Department is coordinating closely with the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and the Department for Housing and Community Development to ensure that investments of CRF capital will bring make new units available to households with vouchers.

(2) Providing or arranging for housing navigation and case management services, such as identifying housing barriers, needs, and preferences; developing and implementing plans to find and secure housing; conducting outreach to potential landlords; assisting with relocation logistics; developing permanent housing support crisis plans; and identifying other services necessary for households to maintain permanent housing;

In June, the DCF Office of Economic Opportunity issued a notice of supplemental funding for nonprofit organizations to meet the immediate need for expanded basic services and housing navigation services in order to rapidly exit and rehousing families and individuals who are experiencing homelessness and currently in motels due to COVID-19. These supplemental funds were issued under the Housing Opportunity Grant Program (HOP) and will meet HOP standards for coordination, recordkeeping, outreach, performance, data tracking, and reporting. More than \$3.4 million has already been awarded to more than twenty-eight organizations to:

- Ensure housing navigation services are available to all households experiencing homelessness in every community;
- Provide motel outreach and motel-based services to those receiving General Assistance emergency housing;
- Connect households to mainstream benefits and services;
- Support each household to plan and act on an individualized housing plan to address barriers to and exit to safe housing;
- And employ rapid exit and rapid resolution strategies.

Funds support a range of projects such as a new ten-person motel outreach team in Chittenden County, 24/7 motel-based services in various communities, new mental health outreach supports, landlord outreach, and support with housing search and placement. These projects support more than 90 new FTEs across the state. DCF will publish an awards summary in August.

In partnership with the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness, DCF will be providing additional training to housing support staff on how to implement rapid exit practices. Rapid exit focuses on brainstorming practical solutions to resolve homelessness quickly and safely, and when possible, without a voucher. Housing support staff focus on progressive engagement and creative, client-centered problem solving. Rapid exits must be to safe locations and include permanent shared arrangements with family or friends, new housing, reconciliation with landlords, etc.

(3) providing financial assistance to Vermont households who are living in motels to help them rapidly resolve their homelessness and enter into safe housing arrangements;

In mid-July, DCF issued approximately \$3.4 million as subrecipient grant awards to 7 organizations across the state who will administer Rapid Resolution financial assistance on behalf of their community. These Rapid Resolution funds are intended to help reduce motel utilization by providing one-time/short-term flexible financial assistance to help households exit quickly to safe housing. Flexible funds can help households to overcome financial barriers to achieving housing goals and can

be used for a wide array of housing options as long as the identified need is tied to a household's individualized housing plan.

Up to \$3,500 is available to households that are homeless and apply using a standard, statewide application. Local fund administrators review and approve applications as they are received. Eligible activities may include rental assistance, security deposit, transportation to live with family or friends, program fees for sober housing or other non-traditional housing, moving costs, utility deposits or assistance, and funds to offset costs for a host family. Households access funds through the local coordinated entry process which assesses all households housing needs and connects them to housing navigation services and available resources.

Subrecipients will report on the total number of households assisted, the number and percentage who exited to safe housing and the use of funds.

A full report will be available in September.

(4) supplementing the General Assistance motel voucher program to address the immediate housing needs of households currently living in motels or hotels around the State and whose motel or hotel lodging is related to a disruption to their previous housing situation as a result of the COVID-19 public health emergency; and

The General Assistance Emergency Housing "motel voucher" program continues to be an important way to support housing needs for households during the COVID-19 public health emergency. DCF continues to pursue FEMA funding to support the cost of non-congregate shelter costs. Non-congregate housing continues to be a critical public health strategy.

Some General Assistance Emergency Housing rules have been reimplemented to reinforce GA as safe housing for people while they work on permanent housing plans. These rules include: an income and resource threshold, an income contribution, and a requirement to participate in coordinated entry. As of August 1, there were 1096 households housed in the GA emergency housing program, down from a peak of 1521 in May. New households continue to apply for emergency housing.

The Department has undertaken significant effort to reinforce the nonprofit emergency shelter network and improve shelter options throughout the state. Congregate emergency shelters have received supplemental funding to support added costs, technical assistance and training from the Vermont Department of Health, supplies (including PPE, cleaning supplies and thermometers), and facility-specific guidance as appropriate. The Agency of Human Services continues to maintain alternative housing for households in need of a safe place to quarantine or isolate when they have suspected or confirmed COVID-19. While we continue to operate at significantly reduced emergency shelter capacity, shelters have re-opened and started to accept new guests as their facility allows.

(5) capitalizing a housing risk pool for landlords to encourage rentals to individuals experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity, which would help landlords lessen their risk of exposure to financial loss through December 20, 2020, while renting to households that have poor or no rental housing history as result of financial hardship due to the COVID-19 public health emergency.

At this time, it has been identified that capitalizing housing mitigation funds or “risk pools” to support communities in landlord outreach and recruitment efforts is not an allowable use of CRF funds. However, DCF continues to explore ways to support local landlord outreach efforts and to help landlords lessen their risk of exposure while renting to households with poor or no rental housing history.