

To: House Committee on General, Housing, and Military Affairs
Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs
From: Wendy Morgan, Director, Housing for Everyone Law Project, Vermont Legal Aid
Date: August 26, 2020

Re: Update of Activity under Grant to Vermont Legal Aid to Assist in Preventing Homelessness

Vermont Legal Aid submits this update to its report dated August 10, 2020, with the hope that it will be useful to your deliberations during the legislative session starting August 25. This update covers Legal Aid's and Legal Services Vermont's efforts from July 1 through August 21, 2020.

Summary: Vermont Legal Aid and Legal Services Vermont have contacted over 450 persons requesting help with rent or mortgages, assisted 35 persons experiencing or threatened with homelessness and another 50 needing help retaining or obtaining habitable housing, and reached out to 250 to offer assistance resolving existing eviction cases.

Rental Housing Stabilization Program

Requests for Assistance and Referrals from VSHA: July 13 through August 21, 2020.

- 355 Direct requests for assistance
- 575 VSHA referral emails, many with multiple applications
- 410 Tenants contacted/attempted to contact
- 67% Provided Information and referral/counsel and advice (does not include more complicated matters that became cases)
- 6% Never reached

Active Cases: Legal Aid has used HELP funding to work on 48 cases assisting tenants to retain housing or to address violations of Vermont's habitability codes; 43 of those were opened since July 1. The cases cover evictions or terminations (24 code violations (6), lockouts (6), and), other housing (12, mostly individualized RHSP advice).

Solicited Court Cases -- Evictions: Activity of Vermont Legal Aid and Legal Services Vermont regarding the 678 active eviction cases in Vermont courts as of July 31:

- 396 Reviewed files from 10 counties (Franklin/Grand Isle evictions are reviewed under a different grant)

- 250 Calls and/or letters sent to unrepresented tenants to offer legal assistance and information on the Rental Housing Stabilization Program. Cases have been opened for those requesting assistance.

Program Improvements: Vermont Legal Aid has continued to work with the stakeholders -- VSHA, Department of Housing and Community Affairs, and the Vermont Landlords Association - to refine the Rental Housing Stabilization Program to make it as accessible, equitable and efficient as possible. We have also been collaborating with the Landlords Association to get landlords and tenants to cooperate as much as possible to prevent homelessness.

Mortgage Assistance Program

Requests for Assistance:

- 38 Received and responded to requests for information or assistance. The majority were provided information, referral and/or individualized advice (66%); some were never reached (16%).

Court Cases – Foreclosures:

- 65 Outreach letters sent to all defendants who have filed an appearance and appear to be living in property in foreclosure. Letters covered MAP program and CARES Act forbearance.
- 2 Representation in foreclosure cases

Support for Persons Experiencing Homelessness

Between July 1 and August 21, Legal Services Vermont was contacted by 25 persons experiencing homelessness or who were denied access to emergency housing. LSV gave legal advice or referred to Legal Aid to 11 of these callers but was unable to connect with 8 of them. LSV represented 4 in or before administrative hearings and all resulted favorably for the tenants who were housed.

Vermont Legal Aid worked under the HELP grant with three households denied access to emergency housing, resolving two cases through direct advocacy with the Department; one is in progress. In addition, under various Medical/Legal Partnership grants, VLA attorneys have handled 7 cases involving persons terminated from GA when living in motels; of those which have been resolved, all were able to obtain temporary housing.

Outreach and Translation and Interpretive Services

As is described in our August 10 report, we have translations of detailed FAQs on the Rental Housing Stabilization Program in eight languages. Since then, on August 19, we posted on the Vermont Legal Aid Facebook page a notice in each of those languages of the translated FAQs.