

TO: House Appropriations Committee
House Human Services Committee
House General, Housing, and Military Affairs

SUBJECT: General Assistance Emergency Housing Program, FY2022 Budget Adjustment

DATE: January 13, 2022

Dear Chair Hooper, Chair Pugh, Chair Stevens, and Members of the Committees:

Thank you for your commitment to meeting the needs of Vermonters experiencing homelessness. Over two thousand Vermonters are currently sheltered through the General Assistance emergency housing program – a number that is currently holding steady due to the lack of affordable housing options in Vermont. We are writing to ask the Committees to mandate, via the Budget Adjustment Act, that the General Assistance Emergency Housing Program be maintained with eligibility criteria no more restrictive than the program in place on January 1, 2022 (*i.e.*, without categorical eligibility and without durational limits on benefits) through the end of this fiscal year. Although we are committed to working with the Department for Children and Families to develop a General Assistance Emergency Transitional Housing Program and explore other options for provision of temporary shelter, we do not believe this can be accomplished prior to July 1, 2022.

It is our understanding that the Department has proposed amending Title 9 to facilitate implementation of a new transitional housing program. We have seen the proposed language for the Budget Adjustment Act, but we have not seen proposed rules for the transitional housing program, a proposed occupancy agreement for participants, and so forth. While we believe this program may have some promise, the devil is in the details. Community service providers and other stakeholders have a strong interest in providing input to ensure that the program will meet the needs of Vermonters experiencing homelessness and our local communities. The rules for the program will take time to negotiate. Any occupancy agreement for the transitional housing program will require scrutiny to avoid conflicts in court over the meaning of vague terms. Rights and obligations of all parties involved – participants, motels, the Department, and service providers – must be fair and equitable, and all interested persons should be given the time to provide input. This cannot be accomplished by March 1. Amending Title 9 and allowing the GA emergency housing program to revert to its restrictive eligibility criteria and time limits when no alternative program has been developed would be a recipe for disaster.

As noted previously, while we are invested in working with the Department on the Transitional Emergency Housing Program, we believe that it is not feasible to stand up a new program prior to July 1, 2022. As service providers working with people experiencing and at risk of homelessness, we are profoundly overwhelmed at this time. Our shelters are confronting COVID outbreaks with the rise of the highly contagious Omicron variant. We are so short-staffed that our leadership are often filling in for absent frontline workers. The needs of our clients are significant, as many cope with unmet medical and mental health needs, long waitlists to obtain treatment for substance use disorder, and so forth, and we are attempting to fill these

service gaps. We think it is safe to assume that the staff of the Department are similarly swamped and exhausted. For this reason, we are begging you for a reprieve.

We ask you to support the language suggested by Chair Hooper and Representative Jessup in yesterday's House Appropriations Committee meeting: to continue the GA emergency housing program using eligibility standards no more restrictive than those in place on January 1, 2022, at least until June 30, 2022, using FEMA funding until it is no longer available, and Emergency Rental Assistance funding thereafter, and to refrain from amending Title 9.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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