
**Report to
The Vermont Legislature**

**GENERAL ASSISTANCE EMERGENCY HOUSING REPORT
In Accordance with Act 74 Section 321.2**

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

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**AGENCY OF HUMAN SERVICES
Department for Children and Families**

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Introduction

In accordance with Act 74, Sec. E321, “On or before November 1, 2021, the Department for Children and Families shall submit a written report to the House Committees on Appropriations, on General, Housing, and Military Affairs, and on Human Services and the Senate Committees on Appropriations and on Health and Welfare with recommendations on the development of a sustainable, long-term plan for emergency housing.”

Context

At the direction of the Legislature, the Agency of Human Services (AHS) and Department for Children and Families (DCF) convened the GA Emergency Housing Working Group to help identify a path forward for the GA Emergency Housing program. Through a collaborative process, GA Working Group members developed and agreed to the plan submitted to the legislature on April 21, 2021. The new rules approved a maximum stay of 84 days in a 12-month period effective June 1 for new participants and July 1 for existing participants, as well as other eligibility criteria changes. While the new eligibility is narrower criteria than during the public health emergency, it remains more expansive – particularly for households with children, people with disabilities, and older Vermonters – than in the past.

During September and October many Vermonters would have exhausted their 84-day length-of-stay limit. Many voices, including GA Working Group members, community organizations, and some legislators shared growing concerns with the plan. The change in support grew from increased COVID-19 (Delta variant) cases and the negative impact that leaving housing could have on Vermonters who met the new eligibility criteria.

On October 20, 2021, Governor Phil Scott announced a pause in the GA motel voucher program until December 31, 2021 for those exhausting length of stay limits in the General Assistance (GA) Emergency Housing program. Essentially the pause means that those currently in motels can remain in motels if they choose. Households who chose to exit the motel voucher program before October 29 could receive an essential payment up to \$4,000 pursuant to household size. The Economic Services Division (ESD) continues to process new applications for housing during this period.

As of October 14, the Department is serving 950 households (1,100 adults, 402 children), a reduction from over 2,250 people in June 2021 (*Appendix A*). Utilization of the GA motel program was trending downward even prior to implementation of the newly eligible criteria on June 1. Almost 1,000 households in motels remained eligible for an additional 84 days since July 1. Prior to the pandemic, the program provided emergency housing for roughly 2,500 Vermonters annually. Those in GA Motel Program currently are some of the most vulnerable, including Vermonters with disabilities, families with children, and households who have faced chronic housing instability (*Appendix B*). It is notable that approximately two-thirds of households currently in motels entered through the disability eligibility category. Demand for emergency housing and shelter is a symptom of Vermont’s current housing crisis. Ultimately, permanent housing solutions, not simply emergency housing and shelters, are needed.

At the end of September, Vermont had 2,000 households in emergency shelter, a motel or hotel paid by GA or another agency, unsheltered or facing imminently homelessness¹. Of those, more than one third had one or more trips to the ER in the past year, more than one third have been in prison, jail or a correctional facility, at least one third are survivors of domestic/sexual violence, and almost one third report a substance use disorder. Over 85% have been homeless for over ninety days, with 76% of all Vermonters experiencing homelessness for more than 300 days. Many households face significant barriers to accessing housing and will require a range of services to find and keep housing (*Appendix C*).

The Legislature appropriated over \$70 million to help create affordable, permanent housing and fund supports for Vermonters experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity. Along with those historic investments, the federal government has extended FEMA's 100% cost-share through the end of the year. This substantial funding allows the state to continue serving an expanded population of Vermonters experiencing homelessness by accessing federal funds as long as available. Through the Housing Recovery Workgroup, DCF is working with the Agency of Commerce and Community Development, Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, Vermont State Housing Authority, and Vermont Housing Finance Agency to expand housing options for Vermonters experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity. There is widespread agreement that permanent housing, not emergency housing and shelter, is required to address Vermont's housing crisis.

While the number of households in Vermont experiencing homelessness remains high, more than 600 households have exited homelessness during the past year through existing programs as well as new and expanded initiatives with CARES and ARPA funds. Never before have we so quickly helped so many Vermonters exit homelessness into stable housing.

This achievement was only possible through significant capital investments to rapidly expand permanent housing – including new construction, acquisition and rehabilitation through the Vermont Housing Incentive Program (VHIP). Since 2020, those investments have yielded 713 new units of permanent housing, with almost 50% (341) for people exiting homelessness. At least 883 additional units are expected through 2023, with more than 400 for people exiting homelessness (*Appendix D*). If additional funding for housing production is approved this legislative session, even more units could come on-line by the end of 2023 and re-house Vermonters experiencing homelessness.

Even with the ability to pay for hotel and motel rooms using federal funds, the availability of rooms is not guaranteed. Although the implementation of new eligibility in July reduced the number of people eligible for emergency housing, DCF has also seen a substantial decrease in the number of rooms available through the GA Emergency Housing Program (*Appendix E*). During the height of the pandemic, lodging establishments were largely closed to tourists and travelers, therefore DCF had been able to access many more rooms than were ever available pre-pandemic.

As of September, 19 out of 76 participating hotels have decided to reduce capacity or stop participating in the program due to a variety of reasons, including opening of the economy, return to serving travelers and tourists, and renovations. The State anticipates losing even more rooms in the weeks and months to come as the foliage and ski seasons begin. Of the still participating motels, some have increased rates due to the upcoming tourist seasons, and DCF is paying those higher rates.

Hotels and motels have been a valuable resource for Vermonters experiencing homelessness. Providing supports and services to households needing emergency housing is a critical component of ensuring that

¹ Excludes households sheltered by Domestic Violence Shelters
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assistance is more than a roof over someone's head and to help individuals transition out of the program.

During the pandemic DCF dramatically increased services available in motels through an influx of resources and the extraordinary efforts of many of our community partners at a time when their capacity is already strained. Additionally, the number of households at motels have also presented a change from previous status quo for local communities and first responders. Transitioning to a more sustainable scale and model of emergency housing allows for the opportunity to continue working to ensure Vermonters experiencing housing crises are connected to necessary and critical supports.

As of September 1, there are approximately 400 beds and 95 rooms, or capacity for almost 500 households, in community-based emergency shelter projects, compared to a 200-household capacity last winter. This expanded capacity meant that many Vermonters who exited the motel program in July were able to move into an emergency shelter. There are several emergency shelter projects in development that are expected to be online next year through federal ARPA money identified in the Governor's housing plan.

642 households exited the motel program in July 2021 due to new eligibility requirements. Those households received a \$2,500 Essential payment, a cash payment that can help these households meet a range of their own basic needs and expenses. Anecdotally, the payments had a positive impact on people leaving the program. It is because of the positive impact of the July payment, that the State issued payments to households who chose to exit in September and October. Furthermore, the State expanded the fall essential payment - \$2,500 for households with 1-2 members and increase of \$500 for each additional household member up to \$4,000. As of October 25, seventy-four households received payments.

The Essential payment is in addition to other existing and pandemic-related support programs. Vermont Emergency Rental Assistance (VERAP) can help with security deposits, rent for up to 18 months, and utility bills. The Rapid Resolution Housing Initiative (RRHI) offers assistance of up to \$8000 for eligible costs such as security deposits, moving costs, transportation, program fees, etc. to help households in motels transition into and keep safe, stable housing. These flexible pathways are intended to help people with expenses that may help eliminate barriers to housing or facilitate a transition out of motels more rapidly and often creatively. All eligible Vermonters also have access to 3SquaresVT, Reach Up, WIC, LIHEAP, and other economic benefits.

Housing Plan

Throughout the pandemic DCF and Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) in the Agency of Commerce and Community Development have met and coordinated with towns and municipalities, first responders, homeless shelter/service providers, homeownership centers, affordable housing developers, community justice centers, designated agencies, public housing authorities, hospitals and health centers, advocates, private landlords and people with lived experiences. DCF and DHCD meet bi-weekly with VSHA, VHFA and VHCB as part of the housing recovery workgroup. More recently, the Departments have sought the input of stakeholders to propose the following actions to address the current housing crisis.

In addition to the December 31 pause, Governor Scott also announced a housing plan to support Vermonters currently eligible for the GA motel voucher program and to invest in permanent housing

solutions. The plan includes a multi-pronged approach – Maintain the Safety Net; Support Safe Exits from the General Assistance Program; Expand Permanent Housing; and Increase Shelter Capacity.

To be able to support the housing plan, **the Legislature must fully fund Governor Scott’s Housing Recovery Plan.** On April 6, 2021, Governor Scott called for \$249 million in capital funding for housing as part of his Economic Recovery and Revitalization Plan. To achieve this level of ARPA investment, the Legislature must release an additional \$179 million in ARPA funding to help create affordable, permanent housing. It is important to send a strong signal that more funding is coming, so housing developers continue pre-development work to ensure projects will be ready as soon as possible.

Maintain the Safety Net

- **Extend to the current pause until December 31, 2021** to ensure that the most vulnerable Vermonters remain housed during Vermont’s inclement winter. During the continued pause, GA clients will still be required to recertify eligibility, receive housing support services and work on their housing plan. This pause can be implemented due to the extension of FEMA funding at no cost to the state.
- **Provide transportation (as needed) for eligible GA participants when no rooms are available within the district**
DCF is working with community organizations to create and coordinate transportation options for Vermonters unable to access emergency housing due to lack of transportation. DCF has \$300,000 of CRF available for transportation needs through December 2021. DCF anticipates an additional need of \$600,000 to continue transportation through SFY22.
- **Strengthen understanding of who is in motels and what barriers exist to exiting**
We know that substance use, frequent and significant mental health issues, and medical and elder care needs are faced by many people we serve, and the solutions involve organizations and agencies outside of DCF and DHCD. By using existing data (Coordinated Entry) and partner relationships, we can strengthen services.

Support Safe Exits from the General Assistance Program

- **Transition Motel Guests to Vermont Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) for long-term motel rentals**
GA Emergency Housing participants can stay in place while transitioning out of the GA Emergency Housing Program and into the GA Emergency Rental Assistance Program. In this separate program, individuals will rent from the lodging establishment and re-apply every three months to DCF to support 100% of their room rent. The Emergency Rental Assistance Program will operate as a separate program from the GA Emergency Housing Program. ERAP can cover up to 18 months of rent. It is anticipated that the existing ERAP I & II award would be more than sufficient to support this in SFY22 and SFY23.
- **Sustain the Rapid Resolution Housing Initiative (RRHI) beyond Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) expiration**
The flexible funds provide one-time/short term financial assistance to help households exit to safe housing. Almost 600 households have used RRHI funds to address housing barriers and increase housing options. DCF anticipates an additional cost of \$500,000 to maintain this assistance.

Expand Permanent Housing

- **Establish a Rental Risk Mitigation Program.** Provide landlords and motels with an incentive and added security to work with tenants receiving rental subsidy. Funds could support up to \$5,000 in qualifying damages caused by a tenant during tenancy, as well as fill other important gaps unaddressed by ERAP and other funding. In order to establish a rental risk mitigation program for 275 rentals, as well as administration costs DCF anticipates an additional need of \$1,512,500.
- **Enhance the Vermont Housing Incentive Program (VHIP).** With current funding, VHIP will have aided over 340 rental units for people experiencing homelessness. With additional funding proposed through ARPA, DHCD could bring hundreds of additional units online for Vermonters experiencing homelessness.

Increase Emergency Shelter Capacity

While shelter capacity has increased above pre-COVID levels, more than 200 winter shelter beds have been lost. Motel capacity remains strained, with no capacity for GA clients in many districts regularly.

- **Expand shelter capacity in high needs areas.** DCF can work with BGS to identify possible un/underutilized dorms, vacant spaces that may be converted or other lease options and then partner with community organizations to operate larger emergency shelters in these locations, even if time-limited (2 years or less). This solution may be most viable in districts with higher populations.

The Department for Children and Families and the Department of Housing and Community Development view the current crisis as an opportunity to shift towards housing crisis response system that can re-house Vermonters experiencing homelessness quickly and for the long term.

Recommendations

Due to the recent changes of the GA Emergency Housing program, the complicated landscape of emergency housing, the continued lack of affordable housing, and the ongoing conversations with stakeholders, DCF is not issuing recommendations for emergency housing for beyond SFY22 at this point. Actions after State Fiscal Year 2022 depend on whether the Governor’s housing plan is fully implemented. The program is at a critical juncture due to the ongoing pandemic, motel capacity concerns, and a lack of permanent housing solutions for vulnerable populations. The Housing Plan announced October 18 addresses the immediate and medium-term concerns of the GA motel voucher program, yet there is still work to be done.

The most productive way to create a long-term plan is to continue engaging communities and community partners around a well-designed and supported emergency housing system. Those partners include the GA Working Group, state agencies, community organizations, people with lived experience, local governments, health care systems, public safety, and other systems of care. These conversations, the experiences we have gained during the pandemic, and the Governor’s housing plan all work together to holistically address a complex problem by renewing the statewide effort to shift to a community-based system of care.

Appendix A – Vermonters in GA Motel Program, by district

District/Motel	# of Households	# of Adults	# of Children
Barre District Office	121	149	46
Bennington District Office	112	133	55
Brattleboro District Office	91	101	31
Burlington District Office	257	293	97
Hartford District Office	59	71	14
Middlebury District Office	23	28	11
Morrisville District Office	42	50	24
Newport District Office	19	24	5
Rutland District Office	101	107	41
Springfield District Office	31	35	18
St Albans District Office	51	58	32
St Johnsbury District Office	43	51	28
Grand Total	950	1100	402

*Information from October 14, 2021

Appendix B – Vermonters in GA Motel Program, by eligibility

Eligibility Category	# of Households	# of Adults	# of Children
Denied access to rental	7	9	0
Disabled	627	690	0
Domestic Violence	41	43	0
Family with child/ren	219	293	402
Lost housing due to health code	7	11	0
Natural Disaster	4	6	0
Over Age 60	40	41	0
Pregnant	5	7	0
Grand Total	950	1100	402

*Information from October 14, 2021

Appendix C – Who is Homeless in Vermont: Information from Coordinated Entry²

At the end of September, Vermont had **2,245 households** in emergency shelter, a motel or hotel paid by GA or another agency, unsheltered or facing imminently homelessness³

Of these households:

75% of Households report someone with a disability (1,676 households)

Alcohol Use Disorder	214 (10%)
Drug Use Disorder	297 (13%)
Alcohol and Drug Use Disorder	150 (7%)
Chronic Health Condition	550 (24%)
Developmental Disability	285 (13%)
HIV/AIDS	6 (.3%)
Mental Health Disorder	1,202 (54%)
Physical Disability	773 (34%)

Household Structure

85% have Adults Only (1900)
14% are Families with Children (314)
1% are Unaccompanied Minors (31)

Age of Head of Household

18-24 years old	11% (239)
25-61 years old	79% (1770)
62 years and older	9% (205)

Race & Ethnicity of Head of Household

White	88% (1975)
Black, Indigenous or Person of Color	11% (249)
Hispanic/Latinx	4% (98)

² Data is self-reported as part of the assessment completed during the Coordinated Entry Process and recorded in the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS); excludes households served by Domestic Violence Shelters.

³ Excludes households sheltered by Domestic Violence Shelters

Appendix D – Capital Investments, Anticipated Occupancy

	2020		2021 - to date		2021 - by year end		2022		2023	
	# online	# homeless	# online	# homeless	# online	# homeless	# online	# homeless	# online	# homeless
FY22 SFR, HRF, Gen Fund					15	2	198	154	162	49
CRF	235	235								
VHCB Non Pandemic	116	19	124	15	40	10	133	24	135	15
DHCD-VHIP	200	57	39	15	10	10	140	140	*300	*200
Totals	551	311	163	30	65	22	471	318	297	64

*Contingent on new allocation of ARPA for VHIP and not included in totals below

In addition to the above rental units, 50 new shelter beds will be online by June 2022, and health and safety improvements were made to 13 shelters, allowing them to safely operate during the pandemic.

Total New Units occupied since January 2020	714
Number of these for the homeless	341
Additional Units to be occupied by end of 2022	536
Number of these for the homeless	340
Additional Units to be occupied by end of 2023	297
Number of these for the homeless	64
Housing Units Completed 2020-23	1547
Number of these designated for the homeless	745

Appendix E – Motel Capacity, by district

District	Number of rooms available
St Albans District Office	3
Burlington District Office	0
Hartford District Office	0
St Johnsbury District Office	0
Brattleboro District Office	6
Barre District Office	3
Newport District Office	0
Rutland District Office	13
Springfield District Office	4
Bennington District Office	11
Morrisville District Office	1
Middlebury District Office	2

*Information from October 18, 2021