

May 1, 2024

Dear Members of the Vermont House and Senate,

We, the undersigned shelter and service providers from across Vermont, write with deep concerns about the language in the Senate-passed budget (H.833) that would place arbitrary and deeply harmful caps on the number of hotel and motel rooms that would be available under the General Assistance Emergency Housing program. Make no mistake, these caps will result in the loss of emergency shelter for hundreds of extremely vulnerable Vermonters.

We urge you to:

- Remove the caps placed on the number of hotel and motel rooms that would be available under the program.
- Instruct the Joint Fiscal Committee to review the program during its November 2024 meeting and make any adjustments necessary to ensure emergency shelter for unhoused Vermonters who qualify for emergency shelter under the program.
- Add an appointee from both of Vermont's Dept. of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)-recognized Continua of Care (CoC) to the General Assistance Emergency Housing Task Force.

The General Assistance Emergency Housing program is already limited to people defined as vulnerable by the legislature. Under the program, during non-winter months only legislatively defined vulnerable Vermonters can access hotels or motels through the GA program, including seniors, families with children, disabled people, pregnant people, Vermonters fleeing domestic violence, and victims of floods or other natural emergencies. During the winter weather program, all unhoused Vermonters are eligible for the program because people cannot survive outside in the winter, making all unhoused Vermonters vulnerable in the winter.

These caps ignore the reality of Vermont's shelter capacity. The state does not have an adequate plan to ensure shelter for those in need. There is currently a statewide shelter capacity for approximately 548 households, and all are full. The 1,539 households currently sheltered under the GA Emergency Housing program are in addition to the 548 households shelter capacity. As the data makes clear, the caps proposed would result in the loss of shelter access for potentially hundreds of unhoused vulnerable Vermonters.

The Senate's changes to the General Assistance Emergency Housing program will result in the loss of emergency shelter for seniors, families with children, disabled people, pregnant people, Vermonters fleeing domestic violence, and other extremely vulnerable Vermonters. The Senate plan places a cap of 1,000 rooms a night on the number of hotel and motel rooms that would be available under the General Assistance Emergency Housing Program during the non-winter program. The cap of 1,000 rooms a night is substantially below the documented need. For example, there are 1,539 households currently sheltered under the GA Emergency Housing Program, so a cap of 1,000 during the non-winter months would mean that over 500 households containing seniors, families with children, disabled people, pregnant people, Vermonters fleeing domestic violence, and other extremely vulnerable Vermonters would be pushed into homelessness.

The Senate's changes to the General Assistance Emergency Housing program will push Vermonters into homelessness during the winter. The Senate plan places a cap of 1,300 rooms a night on the number of hotel and motel rooms that would be available under the General Assistance Emergency Housing Program during the winter program. The cap of 1,300 rooms a night is substantially below the documented need. For example, there were over 1,660 households sheltered during the adverse weather period. Had there been a cap of 1,300 last winter, we would have forced over 350 Vermont households out onto the street in the middle of a Vermont winter.

Failing to provide emergency shelter for vulnerable Vermonters in need can lead to significant preventable harms, including death. Homelessness is linked with a broad range of negative health conditions, including premature death. People experiencing homelessness also are far more likely than the general population to be a victim of crime. These harms are magnified for more vulnerable populations, who would be unsheltered under this legislation. And, the economic costs associated with the failure to provide shelter - including on health systems, schools, criminal legal systems, and other public services - will fall on municipalities and local institutions to cover, which will create a significant unfunded financial burden for them and our taxpayers.

Finally, the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance (CCHA) and the Vermont Balance of State CoC coordinate the planning and implementation of a housing and service system that meets the needs of families and individuals experiencing homelessness within Vermont, with the ultimate goal of preventing and ending homelessness. These two CoCs oversee many of the issues that the Task Force would be directed to study and make recommendations on, including the coordinated entry system and lead agencies. As passed by the House, the Housing and Homelessness Alliance of Vermont, which serves as the collaborative applicant for the Vermont Balance of State CoC and coordinates closely with the CCHA, would have received five appointments to the Task Force. HHAV planned to use its appointments to ensure representation from both CoCs. Since HHAV's number of appointees has been reduced to one, we urge the Committee to add an additional appointee from CCHA and the Vermont Balance of State CoC.

Thank you for your consideration of our requests.

Sincerely,

Kristine Lott
Mayor
City of Winooski

Emma Mulvaney-Stanak
Mayor
The City of Burlington

Mary E Gerisch
Board Member
Vermont State CoC (Representative from
Bennington)

Heidi Lacey
Executive Director
Charter House Coalition

Roxanne M Carelli
Interim Executive Director
Bennington County Coalition for the
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Kim Anetsberger
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Lamoille Community House
Vermont Balance of State CoC co-chair

Michael Redmond
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Upper Valley Haven
HHAV Treasurer & Board Member

Ken Russell
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Another Way

Travis Poulin
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Champlain Valley Office of Economic
Opportunity (CVOEO)

Paul Dragon
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Kara Casey
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Sexual Violence

Susan Whitmore
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John Graham Housing & Services
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Addison County Housing Coalition Vice
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Ingrid Pixley
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Counseling Service of Addison County

Brenda Siegel
Executive Director
End Homelessness Vermont

Elise Shanbacker
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Kristine Lott
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[i] U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, The 2023 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, Part 1 - PIT Estimates of Homelessness, Dec. 2023, p. 16, available at <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2023-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>.

[ii] See, Report to The Vermont Legislature Emergency Housing Transition H.171 In Accordance with Act 81 (2023), Apr. 1, 2024, available at <https://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Legislative-Reports/Act-81-Emergency-Housing-Transition-April-2024.pdf>.