

Homelessness in Rutland County and Statewide

Angus Chaney, Executive Director, Homeless Prevention Center (HPC) www.hpcvt.org

Introduction: The Homeless Prevention Center

The Homeless Prevention Center is a community-based nonprofit which has provided housing assistance and essential services to people in Rutland County for over 20 years. Last year we assisted **480** Vermonters who were homeless or at-risk of homelessness. HPC works with people at all points along a continuum from homelessness to stable housing. HPC is currently providing case management to 110 households (132 adults and 95 children). We chair the Continuum of Care for Rutland and provide:

- ▶ Homeless Outreach & Engagement
- ▶ Housing Assessments (Coordinated Entry Lead Agency for Rutland County)
- ▶ Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing services
- ▶ Client Financial Assistance and Rental Assistance
- ▶ Sponsorship of targeted State and Federal Rental Subsidies
- ▶ Youth Housing Navigation
- ▶ Housing Search, Case Management and Retention
- ▶ Emergency Apartments
- ▶ Landlord Liaison (and connections to programs like VHIP)
- ▶ Permanent Supportive Housing (for single adults and families)
- ▶ Partnerships!

Current Conditions in Rutland County: How Do We Reconcile The Following?

- HPC has been re-housing people who were homeless at a record pace since 2020. (412)
- We have effective programs to prevent homelessness among those who are deemed at-risk.
- There remain a staggering number of people who are homeless, with new people arriving.
- Statewide, there are currently over 1,300 households in DCF's Transitional Housing Program (motels with occupancy agreements). Roughly 24% of are in Rutland County. For context, Rutland County makes up less than 10% of the total population of the state.
- Additionally, as of this month, there were roughly 500 Vermont households in G.A. motels.

What approaches are behind the recent **Successes**?

What **Program issues** and larger **Systems issues** may help explain the more daunting challenges?

First, A Short List of What's Working

- The Coordinated Entry system (helps people in crisis quickly access the correct resources)
- Financial Assistance and Rental Assistance for Tenants
- Rapid Resolution, CARES vouchers (both pandemic-related funding)
- Re-Housing Rehabilitation grants and VHIP
- Strong relationships with landlords from both public and private sectors
- Partnerships with our local housing authority and local housing trust
- Specialized supportive services for youth, families, and persons with mental illness
- Specialized projects such as Bridge Housing (hybrid model) and Lincoln Place (PSH)
- Excellent case managers / social workers

Some of the Current Perceived Challenges for Rutland County (Program Issues)

- Large numbers of people placed in local motels from counties lacking motel capacity.
- More in-flow of people from other states. (But no easy way to quantify this).
- A perception that for each family we can move from a motel into housing, there is another to take their place.
- Concerns about health and safety in some motels (lax enforcement of quality, habitability).
- Concerns about the safety of families experiencing homelessness, and risks around exploitation, when living close by people in full-blown addiction or persons engaging in criminal activity.
- Limited options for county residents made homeless by disasters, such as a recent fire.

Possible Program Issues to Explore

- An emergency shelter system which is easier to access, and possibly more appealing, than that of nearby states.
- Challenges to imposing residency requirements
- DCF's system for providing emergency shelter (jn motels) is not fully linked to the Coordinated Entry process DCF requires of its grantees in the Continuum of Care.

Possible System Issues behind High Rate of Vermonters Experiencing Homelessness

- Very low rental vacancy rates
- Gap between household incomes and housing costs for many Vermonters
- Gap between rental histories of some families and tenant-selection criteria of housing providers
- Vermont's Addiction problem
- Vermont's historic aversion to maintaining enough residential treatment capacity for people struggling with severe mental illness and/or severe addiction (motels are not a substitute).
- Short-changing residential treatment capacity below the therapeutic dose (14 days?)
- State policies that, while reducing spending in one area, may be nudging people from other systems of care into the homeless system of care. (ex: DOC Justice Reinvestment Act).

Most of the challenges above have corresponding solutions, but unless each is addressed, it may be hard for Vermont to see progress in the rate of homelessness.

Some Suggestions

1. That the Legislature and Administration be cautious about pulling the rug out from under people in crisis until there are alternatives to offer. And that, as time-limited programs end, the wind-down is staggered so that assistance does not fall off a cliff for everyone at once.
2. That the Legislature and Administration engage in candid conversations about which State policies and approaches in other systems of care may inadvertently be contributing to the growth of homelessness in Vermont. This will not be popular. Solutions may also be expensive.
3. Continue to support programs that are working, as well as new investments, such as VHIP, that address affordability, supply and access challenges.
4. That advocates and legislators be open to supporting balanced policies which acknowledge that, in most instances, people receiving shelter can share some accountability and participate in activities to support longer-term sustainability (such as treatment, employment, and housing case management as appropriate to their situation.)
5. That we, as leaders, remember that most everyone involved (State employees, Legislators, non-profit workers, people experiencing homelessness, municipalities) are doing their best in this moment, and to try to avoid having our frustration at the behavior of a small number of people dictate how we think about and treat the vast majority of Vermonters who are homeless.
6. And, similarly, that we avoid having our frustration at these larger systems, policy issues and programs dictate how we treat the people trying to navigate and survive in those systems.