

Community Engagement Meetings: ERAP Funding, Winddown, and What is Next

In October 2022, the Department for Children and Families engaged in a series of community meetings to solicit feedback on the additional Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) funding secured to be spent in SFY23, as well as input for the winddown of the same funding source and what supports are needed in the homelessness assistance system and for housing supports. These meetings were convened at the behest of the multiple agencies (Administration, Commerce and Community Development, Human Services) to inform state government decision making on the federal funding and for possible next steps when it is expended. For transparency, the summarized information will also be shared with the community partners who attend the meetings, and legislators.

DCF convened 14 meetings, with attendees from over 96 community organizations, along with District Staff from various State Agencies (Department of Corrections, Economics Services Division, Vermont Department of Health, Department of Aging and Independent Living, and Field Services Directors). There were over 300 attendees, with over 190 from non-State of Vermont organizations. The meetings took place in the month of October to align with the Agency of Administration updated ERAP projections timeline and urgent decisions.

| Local Meetings |
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| Addison County Housing Coalition |
| Bennington Housing Solutions Team |
| Caledonia & Southern Essex Continuum of Care* |
| Chittenden County Homeless Alliance |
| Franklin & Grand Isle Continuum of Care |
| Housing Coalition of Southeastern Vermont |
| Lamoille Valley Housing & Homelessness Coalition |
| Orleans & Northern Essex Continuum of Care* |
| Rutland County Continuum of Care |
| Springfield Continuum of Care |
| Upper Valley Continuum of Care |
| Washington County Continuum of Care |
| Statewide Meetings |
| Monthly Partner VERAP Portal Meeting |
| Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness – Balance of State |

*meetings took place jointly

At each meeting, attendees took four virtual polls on priority of housing/homeless support (2 polls); the extending ERAP funding; and next steps to share their priorities based on region of their work. There were similarities and differences across the state.

The combined statewide data shows the following:

Rank in order of priority (1 = highest), what you feel is most needed in your area?

| Statewide Results | |
|------------------------------|------|
| Affordable Housing | 3.97 |
| Emergency Shelter/Housing | 2.87 |
| Permanent Supportive Housing | 2.74 |
| Homelessness Prevention | 2.54 |
| Rapid Re-Housing | 1.92 |

Types of Housing Interventions

| | | | | |
|---|---|--|---|---|
| Homelessness Prevention | Emergency Shelter/Housing | Rapid Re-housing | Permanent Supportive Housing | Affordable Housing |
| Strategy that prevents homelessness for people seeking shelter by helping them to stabilize/preserve existing housing or identify immediate alternative housing arrangements, and, if necessary, connecting them with services and financial assistance to help them return to permanent housing. | By design, intended to be temporary and to help guests move into permanent housing as quickly as possible. Variety of forms: seasonal or year-round semi/non/congregate shelters, motel vouchers, DV shelters, emergency apartments, host homes for youth, etc. | Intervention that rapidly connects families and individuals experiencing homelessness to permanent housing through a tailored package of assistance that includes time-limited financial assistance and targeted supportive services | Evidence-based housing intervention that combines long-term affordable housing assistance with wrap-around supportive services for people with complex service needs, as well as people with long-term disabilities | Housing for which the occupant(s) is/are paying now more than 30 percent of their income for gross housing costs, including utilities |

*Copy of slide shared during community meetings



When thinking about the 3 legs of the stool¹, rank based on priorities for your area?

| | |
|---|------|
| Strategies to Create/Increase Access to Units | 2.45 |
| Rental Assistance to make housing affordable | 1.84 |
| Supportive Services | 1.43 |

If there is ERAP funding available to extend any current ERAP-funded projects, what are your priorities based on your community? *(Poll was added after the first two meetings to articulate more clearly the immediate priorities of communities)*

| | |
|---|------|
| VERAP Rental Assistance for Extremely Low Income Households | 7.11 |
| Housing Stability Services - 3rd year (July 2024-June 2025) | 5.30 |
| Utilities - REAP or VERAP-U | 4.90 |
| DCF Transitional Housing Program | 4.83 |
| VERAP Money to Move (for Extremely Low Income Households) | 4.74 |
| Reach Up Emergency Rental Assistance | 4.63 |
| VERAP Health & Safety Repairs | 3.92 |
| VERAP Rent into Court | 2.80 |
| Other | 1.20 |

¹ The Three legs of the stool to solve homelessness are 1. A unit, 2. Rental assistance to fill the affordability gap, 3. Supportive services tailored to help people get and keep housing.

Choose your Top 5 "Possible Next Steps"

| | |
|---|-------|
| GA Adverse Weather Conditions - Set season instead of night by night | 58.2% |
| Launch new Permanent Supportive Housing Program for those with the most severe service needs | 52.8% |
| Shallow subsidy (rental assistance) for extremely low income Vermonters (<30% AMI) | 47.3% |
| Expand community-operated semi/non-congregate shelter capacity | 40.8% |
| Expand community-operated congregate shelter capacity | 37.7% |
| Expand Family Supportive Housing | 37.1% |
| Provide a Rapid Re-housing voucher for all homeless families | 34.2% |
| Expand seasonal shelter options | 33.5% |
| Expand GA Emergency Housing Eligibility | 32.4% |
| Eviction prevention | 32.4% |
| Maintain ERAP Housing Stability Services Grants for three years (SFY25) | 27.7% |
| Change GA Emergency Housing Length of Stay | 24.5% |
| Extend VERAP rental assistance for another month for extremely low-income Vermonters (<30% AMI) | 14.5% |
| Limit GA/THP Utilization as a % of Total Lodging Rooms (to address Health & Safety) | 8.4% |
| Other | 7.1% |

Community Similarities

Every community ranked affordable housing as their first or second priority, and most (66%) ranked emergency shelter/housing in the top too. The same trend continued for the second poll, where all by one community ranked “strategies to create/increase access to units” as the top priority when thinking about the concept of the three-leg stool² and solutions to ending homelessness.

When asked about the additional ERAP funding secured (approximately \$20M), each community ranked extending the Vermont Emergency Rental Assistance Program administered by the Vermont State Housing Authority for extremely low-income households³ as the top priority. Community members shared that program participants are currently residing in a permanent unit and without the assistance are at risk of

² The Three legs of the stool to solve homelessness are 1. A unit, 2. Rental assistance to fill the affordability gap, 3. Supportive services tailored to help people get and keep housing.

³ Extremely Low-Income is federally defined at 0-30% Area Median Income

homelessness. Having additional assistance for this population will provide that much more time to work with housing navigators on other income sources, including employment and permanent rental subsidies. 66% of communities ranked securing the third year of Housing Stability Services⁴ as a high importance of the additional ERAP funding.

In the last poll, when asked about next steps, almost all (11 of 12 communities) prioritized a seasonal GA Adverse Weather Conditions Policy and Launching the new Permanent Supportive Housing Program (1115 Medicaid Waiver Benefit). The majority prioritized a shallow rental subsidy⁵ (66%) and expanding community-operated semi/non-congregate emergency shelter⁶ (58%). One third of communities prioritized and highly ranked expanding community-operated congregate shelter capacity. Of interest, 50% of the communities included expanding Family Supportive Housing⁷, including the Northeast Kingdom ranking it as clearly their top choice. Yet for other communities, it was not highly ranked within the top five, therefore ultimately ranked #6 in the statewide data.

Community Differences

In the first poll (*Rank order of priority, what do you feel is most needed in your area?*), Chittenden County, Bennington, and Southeastern VT were unique in ranking Permanent Supportive Housing in the top three priorities. Springfield and Rutland were outliers in highly ranking Homelessness Prevention.

When asked about If there is ERAP funding available to extend any current ERAP-funded projects, Chittenden, Lamoille, and Washington Counties prioritized extending the Transitional Housing Program. Upper Valley, Southeastern VT, and Bennington prioritized the Money to Move Program. Franklin Grand Isle, Washington, Upper Valley, and the Northeast Kingdom chose supporting the Reach Up Emergency Rental Assistance. Rutland County was the sole region that highly ranked extending the VERAP Health and Safety Repairs.

There was more discrepancy within the choosing the next steps for the homelessness assistance system. In addition to the top five statewide priorities, communities also supported the following ideas within their regional top five choices.

⁴ Housing Stability Services grants have been awarded to 20 providers to support a range of services including Landlord Outreach and Education, Housing Navigation Services, Housing Retention Services, and Legal Services.

⁵ A shallow subsidy often provides a long-term rental subsidy at a lower level of (monetary) assistance, often based on a set monthly amount.

⁶ Semi/ Non-Congregate shelter providers private units or rooms as temporary shelter.

⁷ Family Supportive Housing aims to reduce the incidence and duration of family homelessness by supportive families through intensive, home-based case management and service coordination.

| Prioritized Program | Communities |
|---|--|
| Expand Family Supportive Housing | Springfield, Addison, Northeast Kingdom, Bennington, Southeastern VT |
| Expand seasonal shelter options | Springfield, Franklin Grand Isle, Southeastern VT, Washington |
| Provide a Rapid Re-housing voucher for all homeless families | Upper Valley, Washington, Bennington |
| Expand GA Emergency Housing Eligibility | Chittenden, Franklin Grand Isle, Rutland |
| Eviction prevention | Upper Valley, Bennington (ranked #1), Chittenden, Springfield |
| Maintain ERAP Housing Stability Services Grants for three years (SFY25) | Chittenden, Addison, Lamoille, Southeastern VT |
| Change GA Emergency Housing Length of Stay | Upper Valley, Franklin Grand Isle |

Community Discussions

All communities understood that the federal money was coming to an end. There was anxiety around the issue, but there was no lack of clarity and many communities shared they knew it was coming, that this is the pattern for federal funding, and it was understood as a COVID response. At the same time, partners shared that they are worried for not only households experiencing homelessness, but the households utilizing the Vermont Rental Assistance Program to support their permanent rental housing. They are fearful that as that program comes to an end more Vermonters will become homeless at the same time the federal funding is drying up.

Most communities raised the lack of units, identifying that the rental unit must be affordable for low-income tenants and/or prioritize a household exiting homelessness. Many communities have also seen a dramatic increase in rents, including but not limited to the purchases of multi-family housing by out-of-state buyers.

Communities that shared these concerns: Addison, Chittenden, Franklin Grand Isle, Lamoille, Northeast Kingdom, Rutland, Statewide VERAP Partner Call, Southeastern VT, Springfield, Upper Valley, and Washington.

A theme that came up across many communities were zoning and permitting barriers to pursuing community-based emergency shelters. Some participants voiced that the utilization of zoning and permitting to thwart emergency shelters is because of the stigma of homelessness and the perception about the services.

Communities that shared these concerns: Bennington, Chittenden, Franklin Grand Isle, Lamoille, Northeast Kingdom, Springfield, Upper Valley, and Washington,

Attendees also shared ongoing challenges with landlords serving this population, despite funding being available to support or incentivize landlords. Specifically, attendees shared concerns with significant increases in rents in addition to increased no cause evictions and the systemic impact on low-income renters (solutions included moratorium of no-cause eviction or caps on rents).

Communities that shared these concerns: Bennington, Lamoille, Northeast Kingdom, Rutland, Southeastern VT, and Statewide VERAP Partner Call.

A recurring theme was also that service providers that clients are referred to are not meeting the current need. Participants raised mental health services, substance use treatment, and public safety.

Communities that shared these concerns: Bennington, Chittenden, Franklin Grand Isle, Lamoille, Northeast Kingdom, Southeastern VT, Springfield, Upper Valley, and Washington.

In support of their rankings, communities also emphasized having the Adverse Weather Conditions Policy seasonal rather than dependent on weather.

Communities that shared these concerns: Statewide VERAP Partner Call, and Upper Valley.

Other unique ideas shared were:

- Support for homeownership programs, especially because rent is so expensive;
- Support for Universal Housing Application for nonprofit housing organizations; and
- Voiced support for shallow subsidies

Conclusion

Communities have a shared understanding that the statewide efforts to support homeless Vermonters have aligned with best practices, far exceed pre-pandemic investments, and that federal funding will soon expire. Community organizations have flexibly and nimbly responded to homelessness and have helped over 2,800 Vermonters exit homelessness to permanent housing since the beginning of the pandemic. There has been over \$330 million allocated to develop and build new housing units. Still over 2,000 households are homeless.

Across the state, there is clear consensus of the urgency to support people experiencing homelessness and to increase availability of affordable housing, and that the two challenges are interconnected. Solutions for homeless Vermonters was identified as a crisis, urgent, and akin to the pandemic response. Every community recognizes the local responsibility on the issue. Given the significance, there is a desire for the State to continue to support ongoing efforts, identify statewide programming and projects, and assist communities when they face barriers.



The feedback from communities across the state will inform the State's homeless and housing responses. The information will be shared with the Agency of Administration, the Agency of Commerce and Community Development, and the Agency of Human Services. These Agencies will continue to work together with partners on ongoing solutions to the housing crisis in Vermont.