



Office of Mayor Miro Weinberger

MEMORANDUM

To: Commissioner Chris Winters
From: Mayor Miro Weinberger
CC: Sarah Russell, Special Assistant to End Homelessness, City of Burlington
House Committee on Appropriations
Senate President Pro Tempore Philip Baruth
Speaker of the House Jill Krowinski
Date: January 16, 2023
Re: AHS Proposed Changes to the June Cohort Motel Program

In your January 4 email re: June Cohort Collaboration, you solicited feedback from local partners on the proposal by the Vermont Agency of Human Services and the Department of Children and Families to expand shelter capacity for remaining cohort members.

The purpose of this memo is to share concerns about this proposed plan to conclude the Motel Program and to propose an alternative wind-down plan.

It is the understanding of the City of Burlington that this proposal includes a requested \$4 million in the initial proposed budget adjustment to end the pandemic-era motel program (now limited to the "June Cohort") with the creation of 4-5 shelters across the state for 40-50 individuals each for a total of 225 shelter beds operating from April 1 - June 30, 2024.

As of January 9, according to ESD data, 657 households remain in the June cohort, 116 of which are located in Chittenden County. Nearly all of these households include individuals in vulnerable groups, including children, people over 60, people living with disabilities, pregnant people, and families fleeing domestic violence.

This memo demonstrates that Burlington's alternative plan will shelter all Chittenden County June Cohort households until they are placed in permanent housing by July 1, 2024 at approximately half the cost of the new AHS plan during that time. Further, Burlington's plan would use the savings as base funding for reducing the current record levels of unsheltered homelessness, in contrast to the proposed AHS plan which will once again worsen the problem by putting hundreds of vulnerable Vermonters on the street and deteriorating conditions in downtowns across the state¹.

¹ This memo uses data available to us through Burlington's participation in the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance, however, we believe there are strong statewide parallels and implications to Chittenden's experience.

1. **In Chittenden County, the Motel Program wind-down plan proposed by the City of Burlington and CCHA last June and adopted in Act 81 is working and is on track to permanently house all June cohort households by July 1, 2024.**

In June 2023, the [City of Burlington and Chittenden County Homeless Alliance submitted Letters of Interest](#) requesting extension of the Motel Program for the June Cohort while our community utilized Coordinated Entry to responsibly transition households to permanent housing. Implementation of Act 81 through Chittenden County Coordinate Entry², as we proposed, has continued:

- Following the passage of Act 81 (H.171) and on July 30, 2023, Chittenden County motels were sheltering 256 households which became known as the “June cohort”.
 - Between June 1 and December 1, the Chittenden County Coordinated Entry (CE) system has assisted 185 households with identifying permanent housing placement, the majority of which have been from the June cohort, resulting in a reduction from 256 households to 116 in the cohort from most recent ESD reporting.
 - ESD reports that all 116 of these households from the June cohort are enrolled in CE, and bi-weekly case consultation has continued to ensure they are progressing toward permanent housing.
 - We project that as of April 1, 2024, 56 households (approximately 80 individuals total) from the June cohort will remain in the Motel Program in Chittenden County.
 - **By extending the program just three months (to July 1) beyond the AHS plan, we believe all of these households will be referred to permanent housing and the forced removal of children and elderly Vermonters from shelter can be avoided entirely.**
2. **In Chittenden County, the AHS plan to move households from the Motel Program to new emergency shelter will: cost approximately twice as much as continuing the current wind-down plan prescribed in Act 81; displace 80 individuals; and put 35 vulnerable people on the street³.**

The AHS request for \$4M to fund up to a total of 225 beds in 4-5 shelters for 90 days equates to an average cost of \$197 per bed per night. It is questionable that such facilities can be completed within this program cost in roughly 75 days given that no sites, capital plan, or program operator have been determined. For the analysis in this memo, however, we will use these AHS-provided figures:

- The total cost for one of these 45-bed shelters located in Chittenden County for the 91 nights from April through June would be over \$800,000.
- The cost of creating new shelter is driven by the maximum number of individuals in the facility. Unlike the current wind-down plan, the monthly operating cost would not drop as beds become vacant.

² In May 2023, AHS initially reported 184 households in the June cohort. By July 30, that number expanded to 256 households. Our June 2023 LOI proposed using CE to house up to 165 households between June 2023 and February 2024, which has been achieved. [CCHA - AHS LOI 06-09-2023.pdf \(burlingtonvt.gov\)](#)

³ Consistent with the CCHA’s proposal for June cohort households, the Coordinated Entry system has approved a priority policy for housing placements for this group. If they are no longer in the June cohort, there will not be priority for housing resources for the cohort. This is problematic and demonstrates a core challenge communities face when there is a lack of stability with state-funded shelter programs.

- The AHS plan would displace from their current, established lodging all 80 individuals anticipated to still be in the program, and would offer shelter on April 1 to only 56% of the remaining June Cohort members, putting approximately 35 people on the street.

It is widely known that the households in the June Cohort are comprised of our most vulnerable community members. As of November, the cohort includes 354 children. To turn any of these families out of the motels with no shelter and while our service systems are stretched to the limit is inconceivable and I will not support such action.

3. As opposed to shifting to yet another new plan, Burlington proposes instead to continue Act 81 implementation, which will: cost half as much; maintain shelter for everyone; and humanely conclude the Motel Program in Chittenden County by July 1, 2024 with the majority of all June cohort households finding permanent housing.

- The average cost of the Motel Program, as reported by the Department of Children and Families, is \$132 per household.
- Among these Chittenden County households, 20–25 are exiting the Motel Program each month. Therefore, we anticipate motel shelter will be needed for approximately: 56 households in April (\$221,760); 36 households in May (\$147,312); and 16 households in June (\$63,360).
- Because the cost of shelter in the motels diminishes immediately with each housing placement, this wind-down schedule would cost an estimated maximum of \$432,432 beyond April 1 (vs the \$800,000+ cost of the new AHS plan)⁴.

An Alternative Purpose for New Emergency Shelters: Reduce the Current, Unprecedented Levels of Unsheltered Homelessness in Vermont

Since last June, Burlington has urged AHS to create new emergency shelters to house the hundreds of Vermonters being evicted from the Motel Program. [AHS rejected the City's proposal to create new shelter](#) and instead put 800 Vermonters on the street last summer and subjected Burlington and other downtowns to the numerous community impacts of unsheltered homelessness.

Aside from being inhumane, rapid increases in unsheltered homelessness exhaust our emergency response and contribute to a crisis-oriented system of care stretched beyond what it was designed for. As a result, communities are experiencing serious public health and safety impacts that range from increasing rates of retail theft and public disorder to found needles and increased fire risks. Indicators that our region cannot bear another mass eviction include:

- *In Chittenden County alone, the impact has resulted in a 500% increase in unsheltered homelessness, from 43 reported in the January 2023 PIT to over 250 individuals as of November 2023.*
- City staff and outreach partners have become overwhelmed by encampments across parks and on public lands throughout Burlington and report a high number of individuals rough sleeping on a nightly basis.
- Local (and statewide) emergency motel capacity has been fully utilized.
- On December 14 (pre-AWC), there were extremely limited motel rooms available; there is zero motel capacity in Chittenden County currently.

⁴ Note that these figures do not include any revenues that AHS may receive from Motel Program guests that are earning some income and therefore pay 30% of the cost.

- Since opening on December 15, Burlington’s warming shelter (providing service to adults-only) has served over 90 individuals and turns away people each night.
- The only reduction of people unsheltered occurred with the opening of the Burlington warming shelter (from 252 in November to 217 in December).
- Appallingly, ESD referred to the Burlington warming shelter a mother who was 6-days postpartum with her infant and a two-year-old child. The shelter has already served someone with cancer, someone with a colostomy bag, and two pregnant people, in addition to many others with critical medical, mental health, and substance use challenges. These are populations best served by stable, supportive, non-congregate shelters.

Across Vermont, hundreds of people suffer with no shelter at all, and without adequate access to health care, social services, or even basic needs such as food and clean water. When households lack shelter, it becomes extremely difficult to maintain connection or to have a housing-focused approach, as the priority becomes survival and meeting basic needs.

Vermont has a fresh opportunity to get this decision right.

Burlington urges the State to continue Act 81 implementation to July 1, 2024, and use the savings in the \$4M budget adjustment as base funding for a new shelter to help some of the record 250 people in Chittenden County who are currently living without shelter.