



# The Vermont Professionals of Color Network

August 15, 2023

**Dear Madam Chair and members of the Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs:**

My name is Weiwei Wang (she/her), Co-founder and Director of Operations and Development for the Vermont Professionals of Color Network, VT PoC. We are a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing the prosperity of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color who work and live in Vermont. Thank you for having me today.

I am here today to lend the BIPOC perspective and experience since the last joint house and senate committee meeting on flood damage impacts.

We already know that, across the country, the BIPOC community is disproportionately resourced at the best of times due to unintentional or intentional practices, and that Vermont is no exception. We also know that the BIPOC community faces greater challenges when disasters occur, like the July 10th floods and heavy rains that have hit the state since.

On average, BIPOC households are far less likely to own their own home. According to Vermont Housing Finance Agency's data:

- **26% of Black or African American households own their homes (74% rent);**
- **29% of Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander households own their homes ;**
- **42% of Asian households own their homes;**
- 54% of households who identify as having two or more races own their homes;
- 58% of American Indian and Alaska Native households own their homes;
- And 63% of households who identify with other races own their homes.

**This compared to 73% of white identified households who own their home.**

This is what VT PoC has gathered around flood damage to homes since July 10:

1. **BIPOC households who were located in the most severely affected areas have applied for FEMA and other sources of support for physical damage to homes that are owned.**
  - a. This is based on information VT PoC has gathered, and from our conversations with Community Resilience Organizations (Jess LaPorte) and ReLeaf Collective (Jennifer Morton).
  - b. In general, there have been positive reports of BIPOC community members getting support from FEMA staff. We have also received some reports of discrimination, but the most successful areas are those with strong BIPOC leadership presence who can advocate for greater support for BIPOC rate accounting of the loss statewide. VT PoC has also created outreach materials to inform community members the importance of reporting their damage.
2. Some BIPOC homeowners **were/are not aware that the damage caused to their homes qualify as flood damage.** This is especially true for those outside of the Central Vermont area, specifically Montpelier/Barre. To me, this is a huge point of concern.
  - a. We have started receiving inquiries from BIPOC homeowners who believe they have had indirect impcommunity members.
  - b. **We have heard stories of BIPOC individuals being unlawfully evicted from their homes.** Often, when we speak to these individuals, they do not want to stay in the apartment because they feel that they are not safe. They do not want to stay in a space where they continue to be harassed. They also do not want to pursue legal action because:
    - i. They just want to be out of a potentially dangerous situation; and/or
    - ii. They do not have the timeline needed to find a lawyer; and/or
    - iii. They do not have the financial resources to hire a lawyer; and/or
    - iv. They will be wasting their time when they could be finding a place to live where they can have peace.

At the end of the day, all they want to do is to find a SAFE, AFFORDABLE, and reliable place to live, yet they are also competing with so many others in these areas.

- c. **Some BIPOC households have not applied for financial assistance** to deal with flood damage because **they do not want to take resources from others** who, from their perspectives, were more severely damaged homes, or **they are not aware that the damage caused to their homes qualify as flood damage.**
- d. Some households feel that the damage their homes incurred seem to be less urgent than that of others impacted by the flood, and therefore have not submitted the damage to 211, FEMA or other information portals. Their

reasoning is that they do not want to take away funding from others. VT PoC and other mutual aid organizations have been informing these households the importance of reporting to ensure that the state has accurate as a result of the flood. However, when we ask probing questions, we find that they have, in fact, experienced flood damage to their homes but were not aware that it was flood-related nor that they were in a flood designated area and therefore do not know that they are eligible for flood resources and support.

- i. VT PoC has created outreach to notify folks to be aware that they may be eligible, and that they can reach out for support. .
  - ii. Additionally we are talking to homeowners and digging deeper when we discuss flood impact to make sure that they are fully aware that they could be eligible for support.
3. **Contractors are also hard to come by.** We have received information from members who are scheduled to receive a visit but contractors have a long list of other homes to take care of before our members can be attended to. As others mentioned, the winter season is coming and there is a need for people to have heat, water, and other utilities to survive this time.
  - a. For those who are not applying for support or don't know that they are impacted by the flood, they may now be waiting for contractors to receive the fixes that they need.
4. BIPOC business owners, in addition to absorbing the loss of their business for the month of July, are also **dealing with paying rent for both the commercial space AND their residential units.**
  - a. The compounding of the stress of losing equipment and not being to operate, the loss of income for their employees and, often, for their household members, then
  - b. Not having an income is hurting their ability to pay for both business rent and home rent, especially when existing grants are purposed towards purchasing equipment.
5. BIPOC community members throughout the nine counties that have been designated flood disaster areas are also **dealing with loss of jobs and inability to pay for rent.**
  - a. VT PoC, among other organizations like ReLeaf Collective, CRO, and other mutual aid organizations are trying our best to get people support to apply for unemployment, but these applications can take up to 6 hours to complete because the online application system is rejecting submissions so technical assistance providers, like my colleague, Airon Shaw has had to call the Department of Labor to help the applicant complete the application.

In all of this, I continue to ask the State for funding to support VT PoC flood response efforts, as well as those of ReLeaf Collective and other similar BIPOC-led organizations who are committing their time, energy, and resources.

For VT PoC, we are seeking \$200,000 so that we can bring Airon Shaw, our part-time Research and Technical Assistance Coordinator, to a full-time position. Currently, Airon spends 20 hours per week with VT PoC, even without consideration for the amount of time she spends traveling to visit businesses, and she is only able to offer support to up to three businesses per week because of the amount of support they are asking for. We would also like to hire an additional Technical Assistance coordinator specifically for the flood recovery period, for at least the course of one year. There are a lot of community members that we are not able to reach right now because we don't have enough staff capacity. For example, spending six hours on the phone to support an unemployment application for one business owner or community member takes up 30% of her time. By bringing Airon on full-time (\$50,000 on top of her existing part-time wages would cover her benefits) and another full-time technical assistance coordinator (approximately \$75,000 to cover salary and benefits), we would be able to support more individuals, especially those who are not in the Montpelier/Barre area who are still needing support but may have less physical damage. Additional funding of \$75,000 would cover operational costs, such as outreach, general liability insurance, workers comp, auto insurance, equipment, travel, and other expenses that VT PoC would incur from flood recovery work.

I appreciate your consideration and support for my request today, and appreciate your continued attention on the work VT PoC and other BIPOC-led organizations have been doing to support our community throughout the state over the last month.

With gratitude,

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