

Act 81 Implementation

Testimony by 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 providing housing assistance and essential services. We have served the communities of Rutland County since 1999. Last year we assisted **593 Vermonters** who were homeless or at-risk of homelessness. We work with people at all points along a continuum from homelessness to stable housing. HPC currently provides case management and support to over 100 households. We chair the Continuum of Care for Rutland and serve as lead agency for Coordinated Entry. Last quarter (July through September '23), thanks to hard-working clients, some great partners, and a team of inspiring case managers, we re-housed **52 people** experiencing homelessness.

- Homeless Outreach & Engagement
- Housing Assessments (Coordinated Entry Lead Agency for Rutland County)
- Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing services
- 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!

Observations from the Field on Act 81 Implementation to Date

Many of the Vermonters who have been sheltering in motels for multiple years have serious unmet needs and health concerns, experiencing conditions prior to entering--or while in--the motels which are painful to imagine. There is also acknowledgment that too many of our state's motels being used for this purpose are no longer up to code. Even where the motels are relatively cleaner and safer, there is a growing awareness that they cannot persist as de facto shelter or housing for such a large number of families and individuals. Viable alternatives have been challenging to bring rapidly online, delaying Vermont's planned downsizing from its pandemic-era shelter program.

DCF: With that context, we recognize the Department for Children and Families has been handed a very challenging assignment and timeframe in Act 81. Overall, HPC has been impressed with how

individual workers at DCF are managing the requirements and are glad to hear of significant progress with the extremely long wait times which were being encountered on their phone system. We collaborate with DCF to try to prevent people in the state's former Transitional Housing Program from improperly losing their shelter. In addition to our in-office setting, we conduct Coordinated Entry assessments wherever it is convenient for a participant. This has included targeted out-posting and outreach at larger area motels and locations such as the county fairgrounds.

AHS Care Coordination: We thoroughly support the goal of the Agency of Human Services trying to assess people in GA motels for other unmet needs that could be better met by another department or divisions beyond the GA unit, but think some people may be understandably confused about who assessed them for what. It also appears much of the Agency's care coordination effort had to pivot from comprehensive case planning and care coordination to eligibility recertification.

Communication: We are concerned a fair number of participants and community members now put less stock in the evolving guidance and messaging from the State about ongoing eligibility as it has changed so many times since the start of 2020, and implementation timeframes have routinely been extended. At times the eligibility matrices for the GA and Transitional Housing program have become so Byzantine we do not feel qualified to explain it to our clients and partners.

Related Concerns: Vermont clearly has a serious housing supply issue, an affordability issue, too many people who are homeless for a state our size, and a network of service providers and housers understandably strained from nearly four years of adapting to shifting crises, programs and policies. Many of Vermont's existing programs and bold new initiatives to mitigate these challenges are effective and producing positive results. That said, it feels important to flag a few areas of concern which could worsen if unchecked. Examples include:

- Loopholes or softening in repair programs intended to house people who are homeless.
- Ambitious expectations for rapid service expansions which may not adequately acknowledge Vermont's severe workforce challenges across sectors and regions. (Service dollars are essential but providers are currently in a market where a number of expanding programs will likely be chasing the same limited number of people qualified to do this essential work.)
- Rental assistance programs in the "too-good-to-be-true" category which created unsustainable expectations for landlords and tenants, or lack adequate oversight of public funds.
- New construction initiatives targeted to people who are homeless which use tenant selection criteria so stringent they will effectively screen out the people they would seek to house.