

October 5, 2023
House Human Services & Senate Health and Welfare
Joint Hearing on Act No. 81 (H.171)
Kara Casey
Board President, Housing & Homelessness Alliance of Vermont

Hello. My name is Kara Casey I am here today in my role as Board President of the Housing & Homelessness Alliance of Vermont. I wanted to thank you for allowing me to testify today, and wanted to take this opportunity to introduce HHAV. The Housing & Homelessness Alliance of Vermont was recently formed through a merger of the Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition and Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness. We are a statewide membership organization working towards safe, accessible, and perpetually affordable homes for all Vermonters. We represent a diverse network of non-profit affordable housing developers and managers, shelter and service providers, public housing authorities, funding agencies, community action agencies, regional planners, housing, disability and tenants' rights advocates, and individual members -- all united in the goal of meeting the housing and support needs of the state's low- and moderate-income residents with opportunity, choice, and dignity and ensuring that if homelessness does occur, that it is brief and non-recurring.

I am here to testify regarding implementation challenges and successes of Act 81.

We would like to address issues regarding eligibility. In particular, our members highlighted high waiting times to speak to a benefits specialist as a barrier for guests in being able to reach ESD to complete the required monthly reassessments. We heard from ESD that they were reassigning workers to provide better coverage and we have gotten reports from our members in the southern part of the state that things have smoothed out comparatively and that wait times are lower. We are encouraged by this progress and hope to see continued attention given to the issue. Another area of concern regarding eligibility that we feel could be addressed fairly quickly is the narrow definition of who is eligible for GA emergency housing -- elderly, disabled, young child, or pregnant. In particular, the narrow definition of "disabled" as a person receiving federal disability benefits leaves people with physical and mental challenges unhoused and in crisis. Many people with disabilities do not receive federal benefits and they can't apply for those benefits without an address. We ask that eligibility for people with disabilities be revised to the expanded pandemic-era process which allowed for people with a range of physical and mental disabilities to provide a doctor's certification. This is in line with the Federal and State Fair Housing protections for people with disabilities, which simply require a service provider's certification to establish disability status.

While we appreciate the level of attention being paid to the "June cohort" in assisting households to connect with services and housing. We also know that despite the effort to move

these households into housing, many will not have alternative housing solutions by the April 1, 2024 target identified in Act 81. We would like to see a more long-term, proactive plan in place moving forward. We are concerned over the increasing number of unsheltered individuals in our communities. Without a solid plan after April 1st, we know that this number will only increase. This is a policy priority for the Housing & Homelessness Alliance of Vermont. Our membership has been meeting to discuss how we can most effectively respond to and support people who are experiencing homelessness, including how to deploy GA emergency housing resources most effectively. Please include us as you consider and develop policies related to the GA Emergency Housing Program; we want to be seen as a partner by AHS and the Legislature.

The requirement in Act 81 that 30% of new units in FY2024 be set aside for those exiting homelessness is one that we support. Over the past 2 months, 40% of new leases within the core affordable housing portfolio have gone to people exiting homelessness. Over the past three years, over 1,000 households have been rehoused out of homelessness into Vermont's affordable housing portfolio. This would not have been possible without the state's commitment to perpetual affordability. We need to continue to invest in the creation of more affordable housing in order to fully meet the need and support affordable housing residents with services so they are able to stay safely and stably housed.

Finally, we appreciate the data collection and reporting requirements in the Act. They provide useful information and help to keep the legislature and public informed about the progress that is being made with this program. I would caution the legislature to keep in mind who bears the burden in collecting some of the data that is mandated by this law, and what data is currently available. Many times, the data burden is shouldered by service providers that are already stretched thin and can take valuable time away from the direct service work that they are doing.

I also want to highlight the Vermont Coordinated Entry Dashboard that shows a statewide picture of homelessness in Vermont at any given time, and over time. Our Coordinated Entry system, which is also supported by the Institute for Community Alliances and OEO, not only allows our communities to link households experiencing homelessness with resources but also provides important data that can be extremely helpful when identifying the needs and gaps for this population. [Vermont Coordinated Entry Dashboard — Institute for Community Alliances \(icalliances.org\)](https://icalliances.org)

Thank you for your attention to this important issue. HHAV and its members look forward to partnering with you to create a better – and more equitable – path forward for the most vulnerable members of our communities.