

Support H.879 - Ensuring Emergency Shelter for Vermonters in Need is a Moral and Fiscal Imperative

H.879 would create an Emergency Temporary Shelter Program with the intent that “unsheltered homelessness be eliminated in Vermont and interim shelter opportunities be available to provide a stable pathway to permanent housing for all Vermonters experiencing homelessness.” It would also create an Emergency Temporary Shelter Program Advisory Committee made up of individuals with lived experience of homelessness to provide advice and recommendations to the Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families regarding the implementation, administration, and operation of the Emergency Temporary Shelter Program. This legislation would also create an Emergency Temporary Shelter Program Task Force that would be charged with providing recommendations to the General Assembly regarding the operation and administration of the Emergency Temporary Shelter Program. This taskforce would include strong representation from both front-line emergency shelter and related services providers and individuals with lived experience of homelessness.

Vermont has a major need for Emergency Shelter. As we learned from the most recent (2023) Point in Time count, Vermont had the 2nd highest rate of unhoused people per capita in the country.ⁱ And, Vermont’s crisis is getting worse – with an 18.5 percent increase in unhoused people between 2022 and 2023 and a 218.4 percent increase in unhoused people between 2007 and 2023.ⁱⁱ Vermont has also seen the largest percentage increase in family homelessness since the pandemic began (a 213 percent increase or 794 more people between 2020 and 2023).ⁱⁱⁱ But, thanks to the legislature’s investments, last year Vermont also sheltered the highest rate of unhoused people per capita in the country.^{iv} It’s clear that Vermont cares, but much work and investment remains needed.

The state does not have an adequate plan to ensure shelter for those in need. There is currently a statewide shelter capacity for 548 households, and all are full. The 1,539 households currently sheltered under the GA Emergency Housing Program are in addition to the 548 households shelter capacity. There are also approximately 100 shelter beds under development, though it is unclear when they will be online.^v This leaves a gap of at least 1,439 households without the GA Housing program, and this will only be after the unknown period of time it will take for those beds to be constructed and staffed. Thus, we have a shelter capacity gap of at least 1,439 households for the known future. Vermont must ensure emergency shelter for Vermonters in need.

The human and economic costs of failing to provide shelter are greater than the costs of shelter. Homelessness is linked with a broad range of negative health conditions, including premature death. People experiencing homelessness also are far more likely than the general population to be a victim of crime. Unsheltered homelessness is harsh and alienating. In addition, the economic costs associated with the failure to provide shelter - including on health systems, schools, criminal legal systems, and other public services - fall on municipalities and the state to cover. For example, the \$131 average daily cost for hotel/motel in GA Program is substantially cheaper than the \$260 daily cost to incarcerate someone in Vermont or the \$1,386 average daily cost for an ER visit in Vermont.

Couch surfing (temporary stays with friends or relatives) does not constitute “self-resolving” for people experiencing homelessness. The Administration and some legislators have previously indicated that people who are forcibly exited from the GA motel program will “self-resolve” by “couch surfing.” It is true that some people in the GA program have answered “couch surfing” as what they plan to do if they are forced out of their motel room. However, serial temporary stays with friends or relatives still constitutes homelessness under HUD’s official definition. It also is an unsustainable

arrangement for both the guest and the host, and it actually adds to homelessness by exposing hosts to eviction from rental units for housing people who are not named on their lease.

Congregate shelter is a less effective option. COVID is still present in Vermont,^{vi} thus placing people in congregate settings at increased risk of exposure and the potential health consequences of that exposure. In addition, research suggests that non-congregate emergency shelter offers many additional benefits compared to the congregate model, including a greater feeling of stability, safety, health, and well-being for individuals in emergency shelter, more high-quality engagement with staff, reduced interpersonal conflict, greater focus on future goals, and designated personal space and security for belongings.^{vii}

Black Vermonters are unhoused at a staggering rate. Black people account for just 1.4 percent of Vermont’s population, yet account for over eight percent of Vermont’s unhoused population in 2023.^{viii} In Chittenden County, Black people make up just 2.93 percent of the county’s population, yet account for 14.91 percent of the unhoused population.^{ix} As this data clearly show, the homelessness crisis has been disproportionately felt by Black Vermonters. This cannot continue – the state must address the racial justice impact of its decisions and ensure that this crisis is reversed.

Vermont’s housing and homelessness crises will take sustained long-term investments to fully solve. Vermont’s dual housing and homelessness crises are the result of multiple factors, including a lack of sufficient permanently affordable housing units, skyrocketing housing and construction costs, more people moving to Vermont, increasing short term rentals, a failure to ensure a living wage, a failure to provide adequate mental health and substance use services (and continuing to criminalize people who use drugs), and more. While we urge the legislature to make the sustained long-term investments necessary to ensure perpetually affordable housing, including with any necessary support services, to meet the demand, we also urge the legislature to provide the resources necessary to ensure sufficient emergency shelter while we get there.

HHAV is ready to bring its deep expertise to help solve the housing and homelessness crisis. HHAV’s membership includes over 60 frontline housing and shelter organizations. We also serve as the collaborative applicant for the Vermont Balance of State Continuum of Care (VT BoS CoC), which is charged with coordinating the planning and implementation of a housing and service system that meets the needs of families and individuals experiencing homelessness within its geographic area, with the ultimate goal of preventing and ending homelessness. The VT BoS CoC serves all Vermont counties, with the exception of Chittenden County, which is served by the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance, a close partner of HHAV. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the administration and legislature to design and establish a program that provides safe and habitable emergency shelter for all households experiencing homelessness. But, this process cannot be completed by March 15, April 1, or June 30. We appreciate that H.879 creates a taskforce that will include experts in the field to develop proposals around the future of emergency shelter for the legislature’s consideration. We also urge the legislature to ensure that the timeline for the development and implementation of Vermont’s emergency shelter system is dictated by progress to goal rather than dates in a vacuum.

ⁱ U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, The 2023 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, Part 1 - PIT Estimates of Homelessness, Dec. 2023, p. 16, available at <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2023-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ *Id* at p. 113.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Id* at p. 46.

^{iv} *Id* at p. 30.

^v February 29th Pandemic-Era Hotel/Motel Housing Reporting, Feb 29, 2024, p. 13, available at <https://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Legislative-Reports/Pandemic-Era-Housing-Report-Feb-2024.pdf>.

^{vi} There were 32 cases of COVID and 8 new hospital admissions during the week of Mar. 24 – 30, 2024 in Vermont according to the State of Vermont’s Weekly COVID-19 Surveillance Report, Apr. 3, 2024, available at <https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/document/COVID-19-Surveillance-report-20240403.pdf>.

^{vii} See, Gregg Colburn, et. al., Hotels as Noncongregate Emergency Shelters: An Analysis of Investments in Hotels as Emergency Shelter in King County, Washington During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Housing Policy Debate, Jun. 8, 2022, available at https://www.nlihc.org/sites/default/files/HPD_Hotels_Noncongregate_Shelter.pdf; See also, Ryan Finnigan, Shelter and Safety Among People Experiencing Homelessness During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Terner Center for Housing Innovation, May 2022, available at <https://ternercenter.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Shelter-and-Safety-May-2022.pdf>.

^{viii} Chittenden County Homeless Alliance & the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness, Vermont’s Annual Point in Time Count (2023), p. 10, available at <https://helpingtohousevt.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023-Vermont-Point-in-Time-Report-6-6-23.pdf>.

^{ix} Chittenden County Homeless Alliance & the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness, Vermont’s Annual Point in Time Count (2023), p. 10, available at <https://helpingtohousevt.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023-Vermont-Point-in-Time-Report-6-6-23.pdf>.