

January 29, 2026

# Creating an Effective, Equitable, and Rights-Based Response to Homelessness in Vermont



# Introduction to ACLU-VT

- The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Vermont defends and advances civil liberties for all people across a broad range of constitutionally protected rights and freedoms.
- We are the statewide affiliate of the national ACLU.
- Our efforts are focused on a broad range of issues impacting Vermonters' constitutional rights, including the rights of Vermonters without shelter, privacy rights, and the right to housing.
- We litigate, advocate for policy change, organize, offer public education, and engage in strategic communications.

# Agenda

- Homelessness is a housing problem – and Vermont has a housing problem
- Vermont does not have adequate shelter & service capacity
- General Assistance serves a purpose: protecting lives.
- H. 594 Feedback
- Recommendations

**Homelessness is a housing  
problem**

**and**

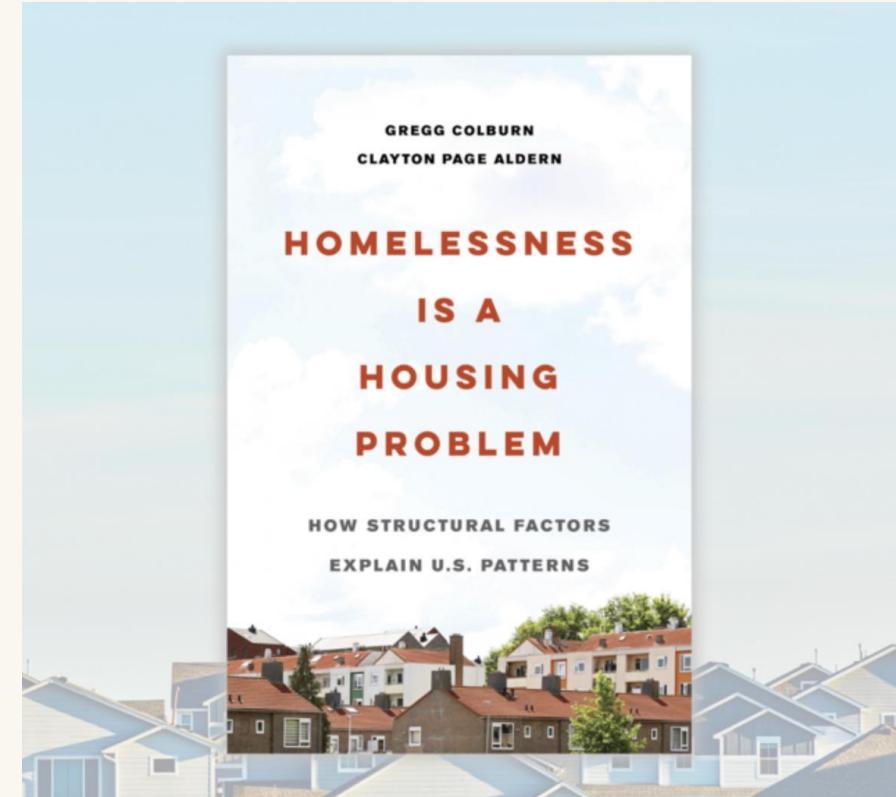
**Vermont has a  
housing problem**

# Vermont Has a Housing Problem

## Homelessness is a housing problem.

Research shows that housing supply and affordability explain homelessness trends.

- Rates of mental health disabilities, poverty, substance use disorder don't make a difference. Nor does service availability.



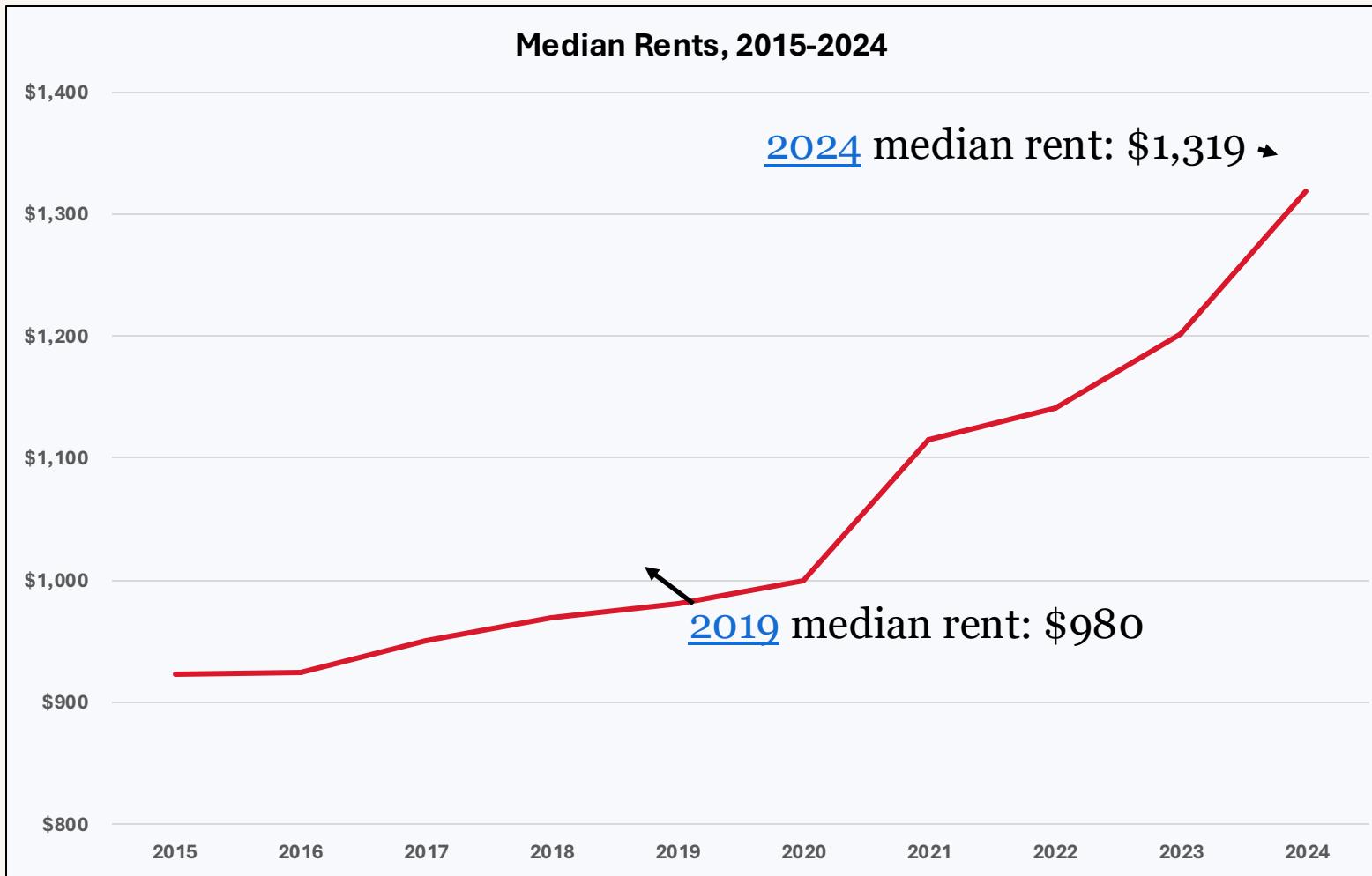
# Vermont Has a Housing Problem

**Vermont does not have enough rental housing.**

- The number of **rental housing units decreased** from [2019](#) to [2024](#).
- Vermont's **population increased** from [2019](#) to [2024](#).
- **Household sizes decreased** from [2019](#) to [2024](#). Smaller household sizes means more rentals are needed, even if the population were stable.
- **Vacancy rates dropped** from 4.5% in 2019 to 2.1% in 2024.
- High demand and low supply = **higher rents** for the few rentals available.

# Vermont Has a Housing Problem

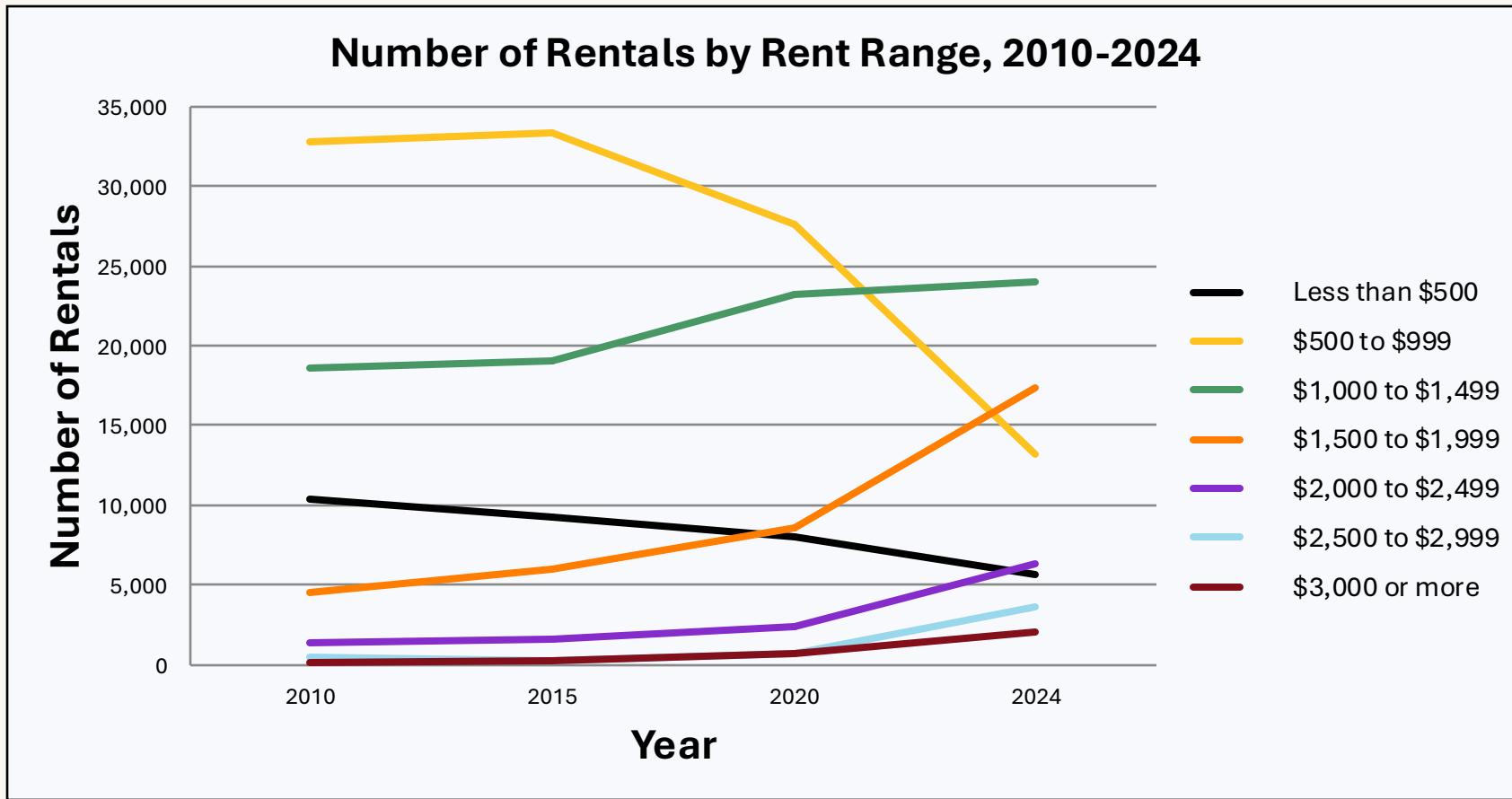
Median rents in Vermont **increased 34.6%** from 2019 to 2024  
(American Community Survey)



# Vermont Has a Housing Problem

In particular, the number of lower cost rental units dropped dramatically. This chart includes private market and subsidized housing.

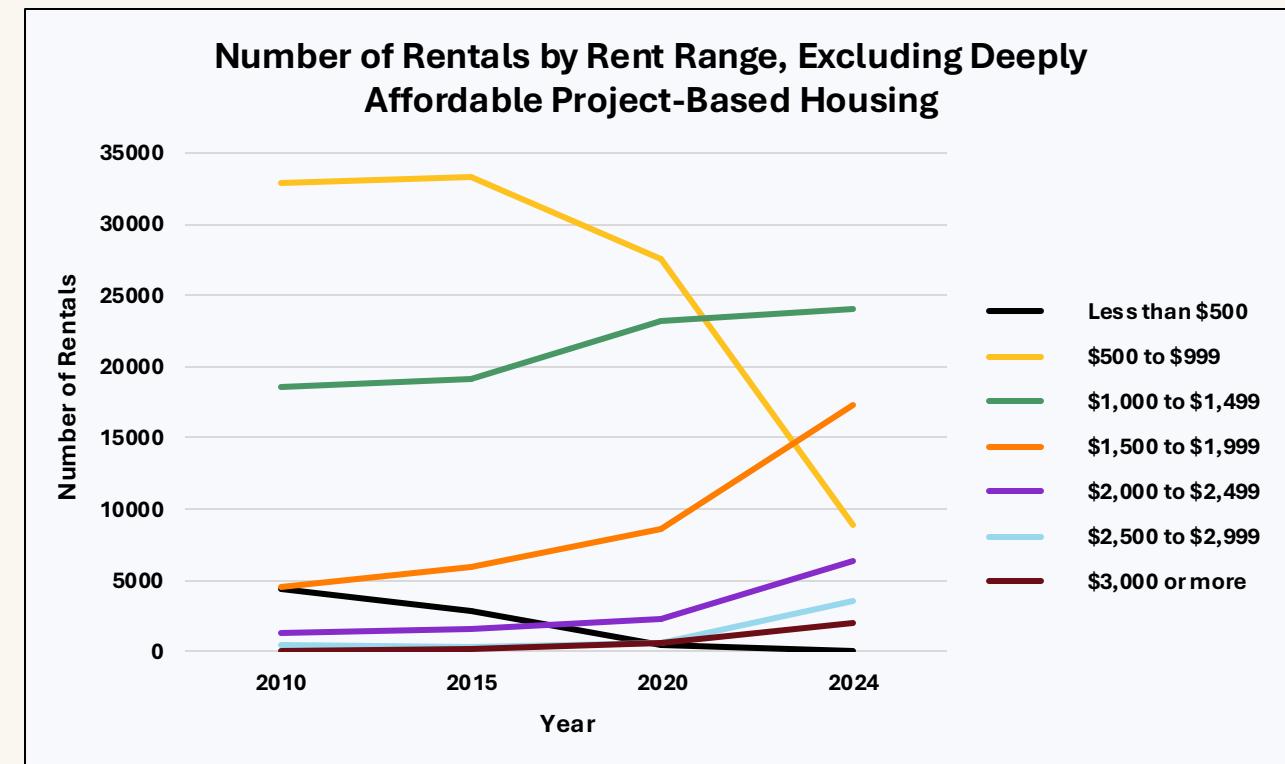
In 2010, 60% of Vermont rental homes were in the \$500-\$999 range.



# Vermont Has a Housing Problem

Looking solely to market-rate units, i.e., excluding deeply affordable publicly subsidized units, the lack of housing affordable to the lowest income Vermonters is even more dramatic.

- There are now **zero rentals below \$500** in the private market.
- The number of rentals priced at \$500-\$999 is now only 14.3% of rentals.



# Vermont's Housing Crisis

**The housing math doesn't work** for low-income households searching for an apartment in the private market .

<b>Household</b>	<b>Income</b>	<b>50% of Income</b>	<b>Number of Rentals in the Private Market</b>
A single person with a disability receiving SSI	\$1,022.68	\$511.34	ZERO
A family of 4 receiving Reach Up benefits	\$976	\$488	ZERO

The private market does not have rental homes anywhere near what the lowest-income households can afford.

# Vermont Has a Housing Problem

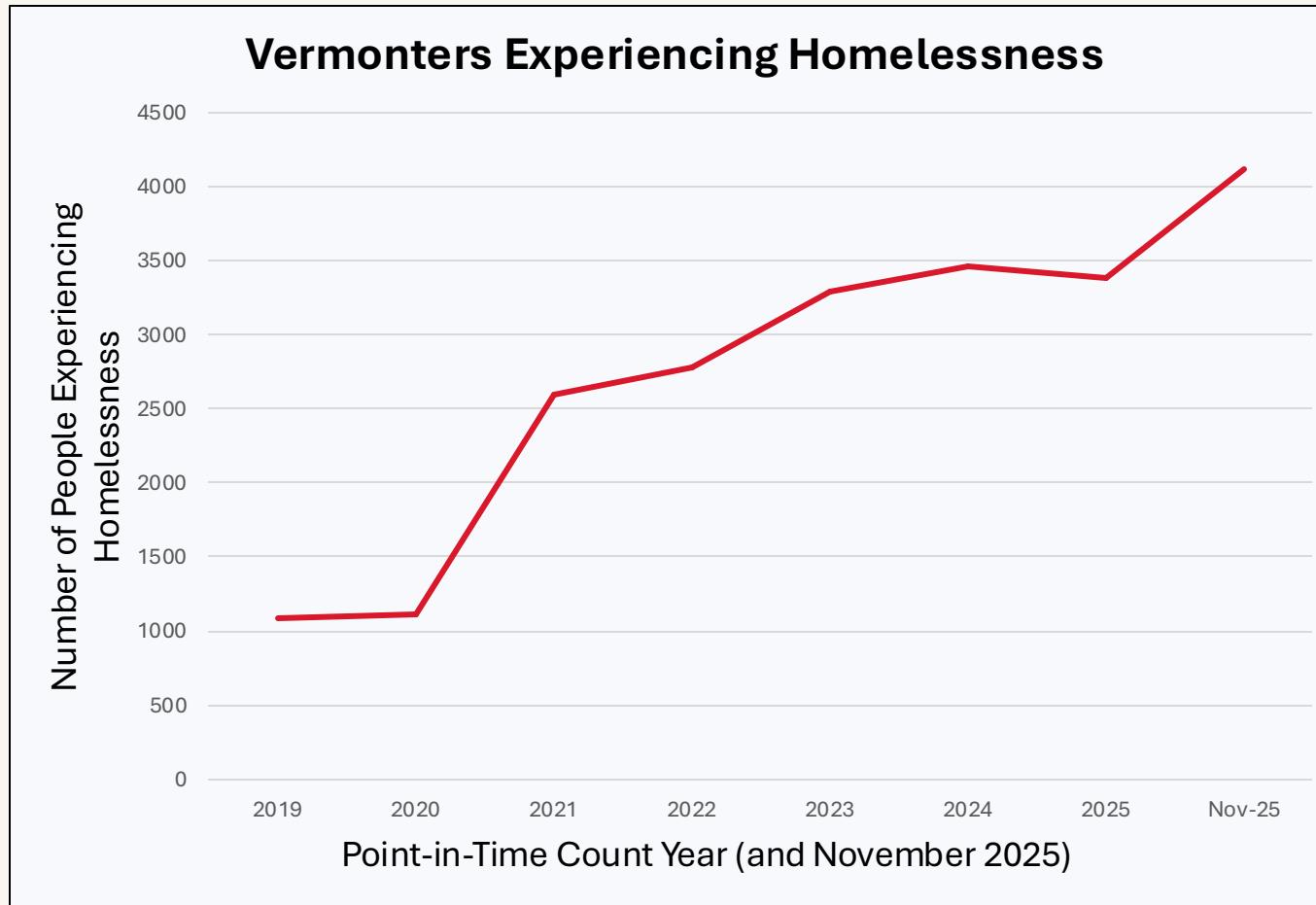
There is not enough permanent deeply affordable housing to serve all extremely low-income renter households. There is not enough tenant-based rental assistance to help the remainder afford decent apartments in the private market. There are not enough low-cost apartments in the private market for people without rental assistance.

Publicly Subsidized Rental Homes	<a href="#"><u>Vouchers, not project-based</u></a>	Extremely Low-Income Renter Households	The Gap
9,999	~4,800	20,551	-5,752

Vermont needs almost **6,000 more vouchers or deeply affordable housing units** to meet the level of need. This number is remarkably similar to the number of people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

# Homelessness in Vermont

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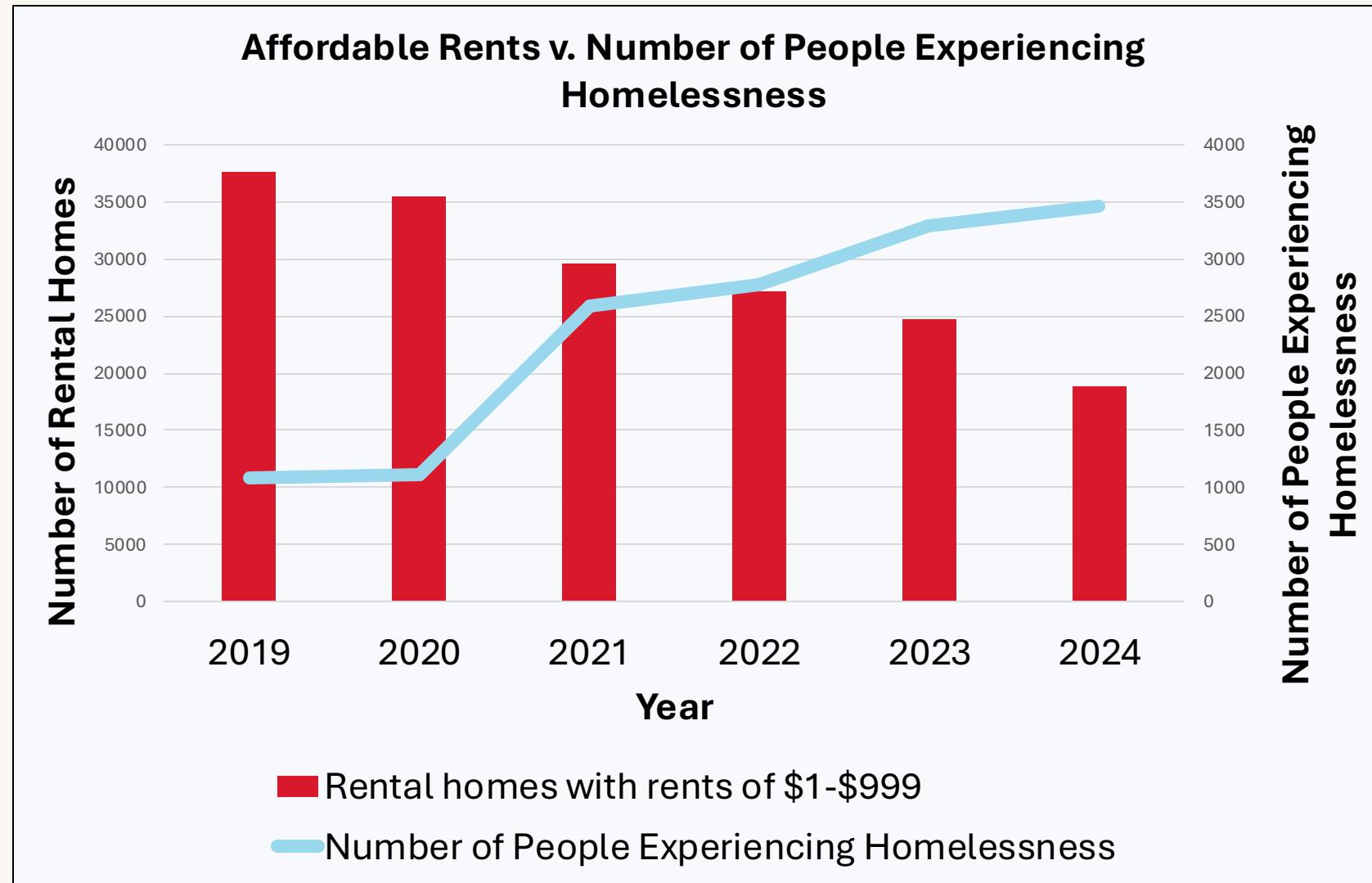


**4190** Vermonters were experiencing homelessness as of January 2026's coordinated entry data.

# Homelessness in Vermont

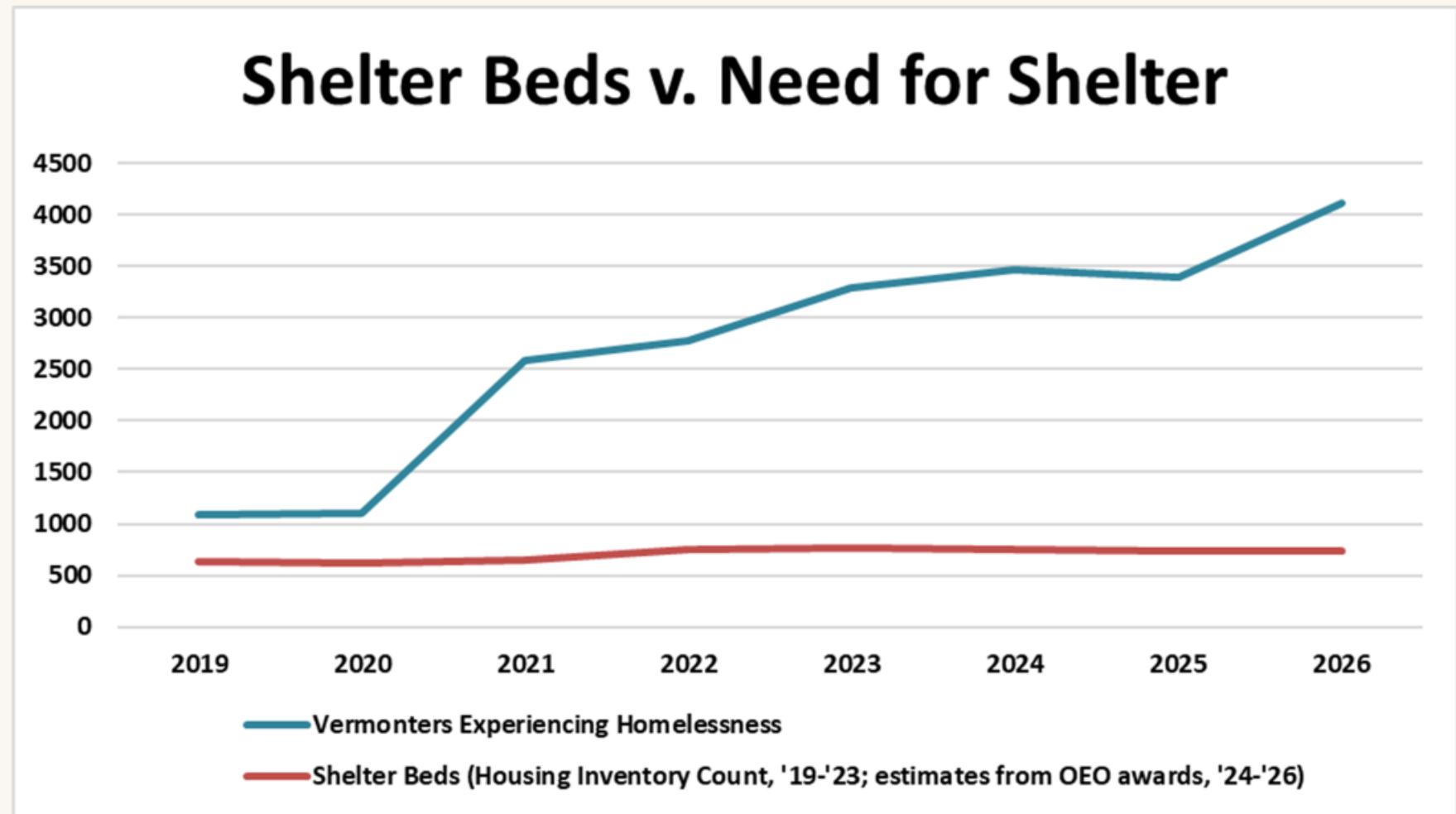
**Fewer  
affordable  
homes = more  
homelessness**

The number of people experiencing homelessness in Vermont is inversely proportional to the number of affordable rental homes.



# Homelessness in Vermont

**There are not enough shelter beds available to meet the level of need.**



# Homelessness in Vermont

**General Assistance emergency housing in hotels and motels has protected the lives of Vermonters experiencing homelessness for decades.**

- The Vermont Legislature repealed the town overseer of the poor program in favor of recognizing the State's responsibility to ensure that people in poverty's basic needs were met in 1967.
- Goals (1967): Equity (access to common benefits), adequacy (meeting basic needs), and supportive services to help Vermonters meet their goals.
- General Assistance has existed since 1967. It has included shelter since 1967. See 33 VSA 2101.

# Homelessness in Vermont

## General Assistance emergency housing in motels prevents Vermonters from being unsheltered.

There is no good measure of the number of people who are unsheltered. But data clearly shows that shelter beds are full, the length of time to exit shelters is long, and there are insufficient permanent affordable and supportive housing options.

- 4190 people are “literally homeless” ([Vermont’s CE Dashboard](#), 1/19/2025).
- [2056 people](#) were in GA emergency housing hotels/motels (as of 12/22/25)
- Community shelter capacity was [649 households](#) (750-800 beds).  
= **at least 1,334 people left out of our system now even without further cuts**

**Eliminating or reducing GA, absent an equal number of alternative beds, means more unsheltered people.** More people's lives and health at risk. More cities and towns struggling to help people living in tents, vehicles, and sleeping outside.

# Homelessness in Vermont

## Who gets hurt when GA eligibility is reduced without other options?

- People with disabilities: **More than 50% of Vermonters experiencing homelessness have one or more disabilities** (State of Homelessness Report, 2025).
  - Some people experiencing homelessness need assistance with activities of daily living – and can thrive in integrated settings with adequate supports. Many of these Vermonters are in and out of hospitals when unsheltered and are at imminent risk of death.
- About **one in five unhoused people in Vermont are children**. This includes nearly 800 children 12 and under (State of Homelessness Report, 2025).

# H. 594: Feedback

# **The ACLU of Vermont supports investing in permanently affordable housing, shelter, and services. With equitable access and dignity for all.**

We all want to see our communities thrive. In order for this to happen, Vermont must invest in permanently affordable housing. Homelessness is the inevitable result of the inadequate supply of affordable housing.

Vermont's community-based shelters do not have enough beds to accommodate every household experiencing homelessness. The General Assistance emergency housing hotel/motel program provides a backstop.

**We need permanently affordable housing and shelter and services that is human-centered, accessible, equitable, and rights-based. We need to invest in data-driven solutions that work for Vermonters.**

**H.594 (as currently written) does not achieve these goals.**

# H. 594: The ACLU does not support the bill as currently drafted

- Purpose: The bill's purpose does not address the **needs of the Vermonters** experiencing homelessness. Our fundamental purpose must be to improve the lives of Vermonters.
- Structure: Vermont's shelters and service providers are private nonprofits with their own missions. Some receive state and/or federal funding and must satisfy grant terms and conditions. **H.594 appears to make ESD the administrator of all shelters**, restricting eligibility and length of service.
- Lack of equitable access: Shelter benefits and services are **not equitably available** statewide and Tier I places unlawful barriers to access.
- **Bed capacity inadequacy**: Motel eligibility is not clearly defined but is massively restricted without clear alternatives, reduced from 1100 to 400 rooms in just one fiscal year.

## H. 594: Equity problems with TEHAP

ESD would be required to administer TEHAP equitably, but **H.594's benefits are not equitably accessible.**

- Tier 1 shelter offers up to 180 days of benefits. Tier 2 is only 60 days. No rational basis is provided for this distinction.
- Tier 1 high barrier shelter is limited by "geographic accessibility," "capacity," "physical . . . ability to comply with Program expectations," etc. This is not equitable.
- Tier 1 shelter includes vague and undefined "accountability measures" and limits eligibility to people with the "behavioral ability to comply..." This is not equitable.
- Tier 2 shelters appear to offer fewer services than Tier 1 shelters. Services must be offered equitably.

## H. 594: TEHAP limits already highly restrictive eligibility.

**The ACLU of Vermont does not support Section 4's eligibility "prioritization."**

- Eligibility should not be left to chance. "Prioritization" is different from clear eligibility rules – "prioritization" is vague and opens the door to arbitrary results.
- H.594 deprioritizes people who lost housing through no fault of their own, including:
  - disaster survivors
  - households evicted for "no cause"
  - People rendered homeless following a family member's death.

## **H. 594: Hotel and motel use is dramatically limited without viable alternatives.**

**H.594 imposes significant limits on motel and hotel use-without a clear alternative plan.**

- Dramatically reduces the cap on the number of rooms from 1100 to only 400 by FY27 with inadequate investment in alternatives.
- Further limits use of motels to an indeterminate number in FY28.
- Notes that where no safe, reasonable alternative exists and lack of shelter would create an imminent risk to health or safety, hotel or motel use "may" be authorized.
  - Being unsheltered creates an imminent risk to health or safety for all households experiencing homelessness.
  - "May" is excessively vague.
  - Funding for motels appears to be reduced by 80%.

# H. 594: Unlawful Proof of Residency Requirements

**H.594 requires applicants to provide proof of residency in Vermont, like a utility bill, when they have no home. This is unreasonable and is likely unlawful.**

- The best proof that a person resides here is their physical existence in the state and a declaration of their intent to stay. Anything else is unreasonably burdensome.
- Requiring a lease, utility bill, or license creates a de facto durational residency requirement.
  - According to a [2024 VT legislative counsel](#) memo: “A durational residency requirement as a condition for obtaining a benefit that is a necessity of life violates a citizen’s constitutional right to travel and the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment, unless there is a compelling state interest for imposing the requirement. To date, no case reviewed by the U.S. Supreme Court involving welfare- and health-related benefits conditioned on durational residency requirements has identified a compelling government interest.”

# **H. 594 includes nativist & stigmatizing language- which we don't believe is this committee's intent**

**The "Return Home Program" funds removing people experiencing homelessness or perceived to be at risk of becoming a "public charge" from Vermont. But we all have a right to be here.**

"[A] citizen of the United States can, of his own volition, become a citizen of any State of the Union . . . with the same rights as other citizens of that State." Slaughter-House Cases (1872).

## **H.594's focus on "Fraud Prevention" is unwarranted and redundant.**

With no evidence to show that fraud is rampant among people experiencing homelessness, the bill creates unnecessary fraud penalties. All DCF programs are already subject to Chapter 1, Subchapter 5, of Title 33, which prohibits and sets forth penalties for fraud for any person who knowingly fails, by false statement, misrepresentation, or other fraudulent means, to disclose material facts to receive aid or benefits under a State or federally funded assistance program in Vermont.

# *A note on the Governor's Initiative: Current Needs vs Proposed Investments*

Eligibility Category	% of Households by Category
Age 65+	6%
Court Ordered/Constructive Eviction	4%
Death of a Spouse, Domestic Partner or Minor Child	0%
Disabled (201G-VR)	28%
Disabled (SSI/SSDI)	34%
Domestic Violence	4%
Families with Children	22%
Flood	0%
Natural Disaster	0%
Natural Disaster (excluding flood)	0%
Pregnant	2%

Combined percentage of all people with disabilities: 62% of program participants

[Emergency Housing Annual Report, DCF 2025](#)

# ***Current Needs vs Proposed Investments***

The Governor's Housing Initiative does not reflect current population needs.

- It is also not clear whether these initiatives will reflect immediate access to shelter/ 1:1 match for the proposed loss of GA rooms

This is particularly important when considering proposed cuts to GA, largely supporting Vermonters with disabilities:

## **Governor's Housing Initiative: Population-Specific Investments**

Family Specific Sheltering Option	\$7,884,000
Medically Vulnerable Sheltering	\$2,628,000
Substance Use Recovery	\$1,200,000 (1x)
Domestic Violence Sheltering Option	\$500,000

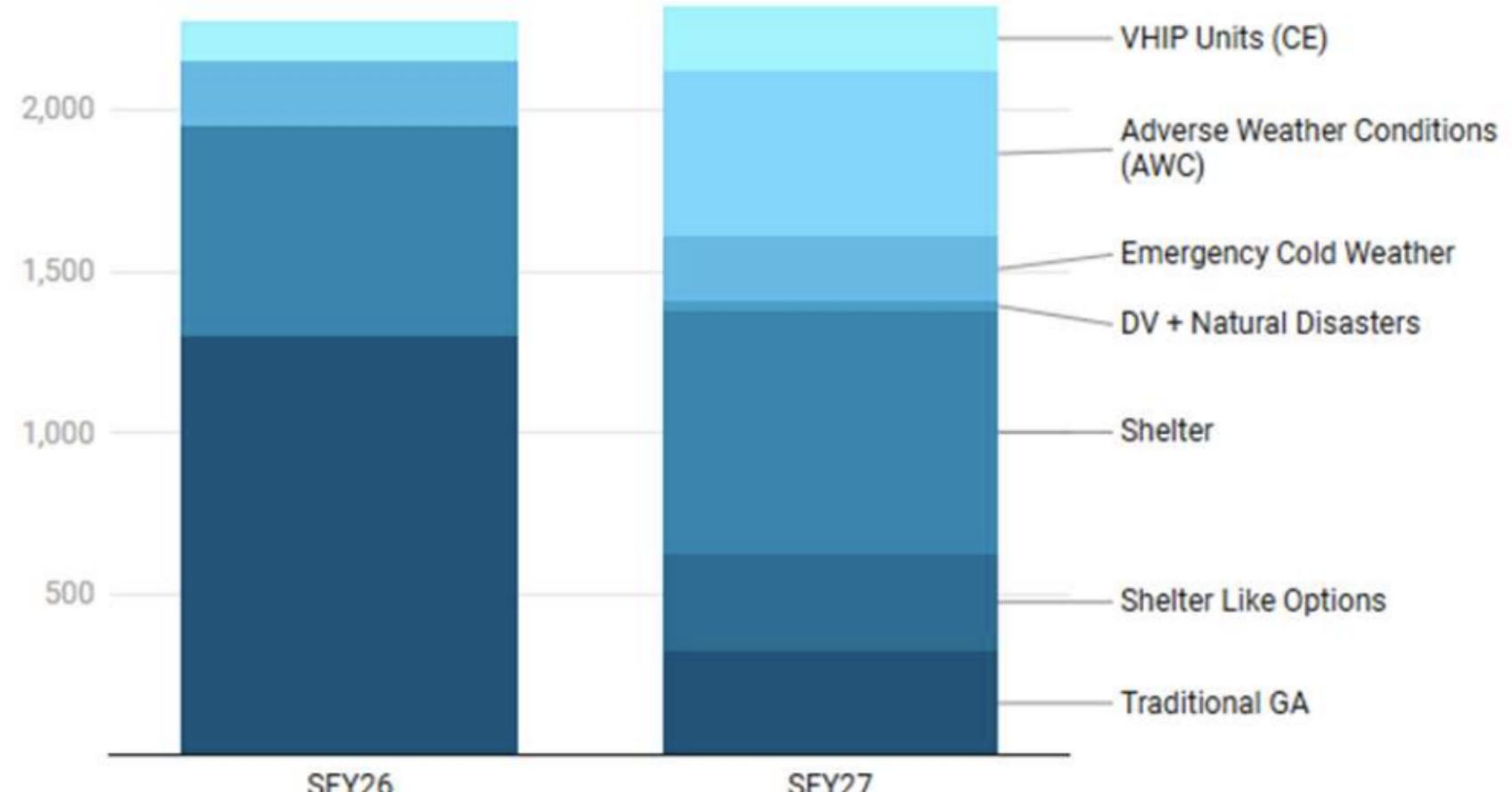
## **GA Proposed Changes: 60% decrease beginning July**

FY26 Actual	FY27 Gov Rec
\$38,500,000	\$15,183,809

# *Current Needs vs Proposed Investments*

What data is informing this configuration?

Does this plan address root causes, work toward shared goals of eliminating unsheltered homelessness, and keep Vermonters safe in the interim?



AHS Housing Initiative Proposal, 2026

# Recommendations

# ACLU of VT Proposal: *The Need for a Strategic Plan*

We support efforts that seek to invest in long-term housing solutions for people experiencing homelessness. In order to shift from an emergency response to investing in these long-term needs, we believe the state needs to facilitate an analysis of where our investments need to be going to ensure cost-effectiveness and efficiency.

- Last report of this nature was the 2017 Road to End Homelessness Report- homelessness has changed significantly since this time.
- Housing development plans that address the needs of the population existing homelessness are currently nonexistent
- There is a particular need to conduct an analysis to guide state response to the loss of federal funding sources
- Shelter development plans must include a statewide report of geographic and population equity needs

# Develop solutions that will work.

**Vermont has changed in the past decade. Study the need for housing, shelter, and services, update the Roadmap to End Homelessness (2017), and find data-driven solutions.**

A project manager, nationally recognized organization with expertise in homelessness, and Task Force of Vermonters with lived and professional expertise in homelessness and housing will conduct a study, produce a report, and develop recommendations and an action plan, including:

- A measure of the affordable housing needs in each county, including alternative housing types like SROs, service-enriched housing, and modular tiny homes;
- Service needs, including for chronic health conditions;
- Shelter needs, including low-barrier and service-enriched options; and
- Recommended modifications to homelessness prevention and rapid rehousing programs.

# Protect the lives of Vermonters: Interim solution, FY27-FY28

The interim solution for FY27-FY28 must recognize:

- **Housing is health. Shelter protects lives.** Absent an alternative in permanent affordable housing, emergency beds, whether in motels, shelters, or innovative alternatives, cannot be decreased.
- Under Title II of the ADA and Vermont's Public Accommodations Act, **Vermont's homelessness response system must meet the needs of people with disabilities in integrated, community-based settings.**
- **Rights matter. Civil liberties matter.** People experiencing homelessness deserve to have due process, a right to privacy and personal autonomy – the rights that we expect as Vermonters.

**"The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members."**

# Questions?

Visit [acluvt.org](http://acluvt.org) to learn more  
and get involved in our work.