

Good morning Chair Wood and members of the House Committee on Human Services. My name is Melissa Battah, and I am the Executive Director of Vermont Interfaith Action. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Vermont Interfaith Action serves as the administrator of Vermont's Extreme Cold Weather Shelter Program. I want to walk you through our process for how extreme weather provisions are assessed, activated, and implemented, and to share what we have learned from administering this program during increasingly volatile winter conditions.

At its core, the Extreme Cold Weather Shelter Program exists to prevent loss of life for our unhoused neighbors. Our guiding principle is simple: no one should be left outside when weather conditions pose a serious and foreseeable risk to human safety. The work is logistical, relational, and time sensitive, and it depends on coordination across state agencies, local partners, and shelter providers.

Monitoring and Assessment

Our process begins with continuous monitoring of weather conditions. We track National Weather Service forecasts daily, with particular attention to temperature, wind chill, precipitation, and duration of exposure risk. Extreme cold events are rarely just about a single overnight low; extended periods of subfreezing temperatures, ice, snow accumulation, and wind all compound danger, especially for people already living outdoors or in unstable conditions.

When forecasts approach sustained temperatures of 0°F including wind chill for optional activation, and -10°F including wind chill for mandatory implementation, VIA initiates an internal review. This includes checking in directly with Extreme Cold Weather Shelter Program sites to confirm their readiness to operate, including staffing, supplies, and any logistical needs, so we can ensure each site is prepared to safely receive guests.

Coordination and Decision-Making

Once conditions indicate a need for activation, VIA's Extreme Cold Weather Shelter Program staff begin sending out activation warnings to shelter sites, DCF staff, state workers, and 211 staff.

Our role as administrator is to determine when extreme weather provisions should be activated and to ensure that shelters and emergency sites have the authorization, communication, and operational support they need to respond quickly. Decisions are made with urgency but also consistency, guided by established criteria rather than ad hoc judgment.

Implementation on the Ground

When extreme weather sheltering is activated, the ECWSP staff provide technical assistance to shelter site locations, helping them manage bed availability, extended hours, and temporary overflow options. They support sites in addressing barriers that may prevent people from

accessing shelter, including transportation challenges, medical vulnerabilities, or trauma-related needs.

The staff also maintain ongoing communication with frontline outreach workers, faith communities, and local organizers, offering guidance and support to ensure that shelters can respond effectively to critical incidents and rapidly changing conditions. This coordination helps ensure timely and safe access to shelter for those in need.

Challenges and Limitations

While the Extreme Cold Weather Shelter Program has prevented harm and saved lives, it operates within real constraints. Capacity remains limited, staffing shortages are persistent, especially during holidays, and facilities were not designed to absorb the growing scale of need we now see. Extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and less predictable, stretching a system that was never intended to function as a long-term housing solution.

The program also highlights a fundamental tension: emergency sheltering is reactive by nature. It is a necessary safety net, but it is not a substitute for stable, permanent housing. Each activation underscores the urgency of addressing the broader housing and homelessness crisis in Vermont.

In closing, VIA's process as administrator is built on vigilance, coordination, and rapid response. We take this responsibility seriously because the consequences of delay or inaction are severe. Extreme weather sheltering is one of the last lines of defense for people with nowhere else to go.

Thank you for your attention and for your continued work on policies that affect our most vulnerable neighbors. I am happy to answer any questions the committee may have.

Location of shelter sites: <https://dcf.vermont.gov/oeo/programs/ECWSP>

Email to contact the program: ECWSP@viavt.org

Total number of beds across the six regions/shelter sites: 217