

January 15, 2025

Dear Legislator:

We, the below signed shelter and service providers, advocates, and municipalities from across Vermont, urge you to support the recommendations submitted today to the legislature by the General Assistance Emergency Housing Task Force. These recommendations, if implemented, would substantially reduce the unconscionable harms that unhoused Vermonters face every day because of our state's lack of sufficient emergency shelter and supports.

The General Assistance Emergency Housing Task Force, which included 13 members representing people with lived experience of homelessness, Vermont's affordable housing, shelter, mental health, and service provider communities, municipalities, and Governor Scott's administration, was charged with providing the legislature with recommendations around 12 charges. The Task Force's report, submitted today to the legislature, provided detailed recommendations for these charges, including:

- Ensuring maximum days of eligibility for the General Assistance Emergency Housing program is determined by the actual length of time it takes unhoused Vermonters on average to obtain housing.
- Ensuring that state agencies fully participate in coordinated entry, which serves as Vermont's homelessness response system.
- Ensuring that eligibility for the General Assistance Emergency Housing program is relaxed during cold weather months to ensure unsheltered Vermonters do not die from exposure.
- Ensuring that there is consistent capital available to fund affordable housing projects, which serve as the true solution to Vermont's homelessness crisis.
- Ensuring an expedited and consolidated appeal review for development projects that meet a threshold for affordability.
- Removing zoning hurdles that may reduce the number of shelter and/or permanent supportive housing units that could be created through hotel or motel conversions.

The urgency of these recommendations cannot be overstated. Vermont's homelessness crisis surpassed another record last year. According to the most recent Point in Time Count (2024), there were 3,458 unhoused Vermonters in a single night, including 737 children and 646 Vermonters 55 years old or older.¹ This number represents a five percent increase over Vermont's previous record year in 2023.² To make matters worse, Black Vermonters are 5.6 times more likely than white Vermonters to be unhoused this

¹ HHAV, et. al., 2024 Vermont's Annual Point-in-Time Count, June 2024, available at <https://helpingtohousevt.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/2024-PIT-Report-final.pdf>.

² HHAV, et. al., 2024 Vermont's Annual Point-in-Time Count, June 2024, available at <https://helpingtohousevt.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/2024-PIT-Report-final.pdf>.

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year.³ And, Vermont's PIT count numbers are an undercount, as it reflects only the people who engaged with our state's dedicated and perpetually under-resourced shelter and service providers on the PIT count day.

Despite the record high number of unhoused Vermonters, our state does not have an adequate plan to ensure shelter for those in need. For example, Vermont's current statewide shelter capacity is 585 households, and all are full.⁴ The 1,175 households currently sheltered through the GA Program are in addition to the state's 585 household shelter capacity.⁵ Even combined, these numbers do not come close to meeting the need found during the 2024 Point in Time Count.

To make matters worse, without legislative action, hundreds of additional households will lose their access to the GA Program on April 1 when the emergency winter housing protections expire. According to the most recent Department for Children and Families Housing Report, this would include 590 adults and 160 children.⁶ This looming additional humanitarian crisis is the result of legislation passed last year that set a maximum number of annual days (80 days) that eligible households⁷ could receive emergency housing in a hotel or motel under the General Assistance Emergency Housing Program⁸ and a maximum number of hotel and motel rooms available between September 15, 2024 and November 30, 2024 and between April 1, 2025 and June 30, 2025.⁹

³ There were 2,904 white people unhoused and 254 Black people unhoused. The total state population (according to U.S. Census) for White people is 577,751 and is 9,034 for Black people. The ratio for white is 1 in 198.95 people and Black is 1 in 35.56 people. See, HHAV, et. al., 2024 Vermont's Annual Point-in-Time Count, June 2024, available at <https://helpingtohousevt.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/2024-PIT-Report-final.pdf>.

⁴ Because Vermont is a shelter first state, these 585 beds are all filled before someone is offered General Assistance Emergency Housing. See., Vermont Dept. of Children and Families, December 31st Housing Report, p. 15, Jan. 2, 2025, available at

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Legislative-Reports/Act-113-Monthly-Housing-Reporting-12.31.2024.pdf>.

⁵ GA Emergency Housing Program as of January 6, 2025, available at

<https://dcf.vermont.gov/Addressing-and-Preventing-Unsheltered-Homelessness>.

⁶ Vermont Dept. of Children and Families, December 31st Housing Report, p. 7, Jan. 2, 2025, available at

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Legislative-Reports/Act-113-Monthly-Housing-Reporting-12.31.2024.pdf>.

⁷ Eligibility is limited to: (1) is 65 years of age or older; (2) has a disability that can be documented by: (A) receipt of Supplemental Security Income or Social Security Disability Insurance; or (B) a form developed by the Department as a means of documenting a qualifying disability or health condition that requires: (i) the applicant's name, date of birth, and the last four digits of the applicant's Social Security number or other identifying number; (ii) a description of the applicant's disability or health condition; (iii) a description of the risk posed to the applicant's health, safety, or welfare if temporary emergency housing is not authorized pursuant to this section; and (iv) a certification of a health care provider, as defined in 18 V.S.A. § 9481, that includes the provider's credentials, credential number, address, and phone number; (3) is a child 19 years of age or under; (4) is pregnant; (5) has experienced the death of a spouse, domestic partner, or minor child that caused the household to lose its housing; (6) has experienced a natural disaster, such as a flood, fire, or hurricane; (7) is under a court-ordered eviction or constructive eviction due to circumstances over which the household has no control; or (8) is experiencing domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, human trafficking, hate violence, or other dangerous or life threatening conditions that relate to violence against the individual or a household member that caused the household to lose its housing.

⁸ Act 113, Sec. E.32, (b)(2).

⁹ Act 113, Sec. E.32, (b)(1).

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As this data clearly shows, Vermont's shelter and service system is beyond capacity. As providers, we continue to be at the point of triaging cases to focus on keeping people literally alive. This is a humanitarian crisis and requires immediate action by the state. As a legislator, we urge you to strongly support the General Assistance Emergency Housing Task Force recommendations, which will ensure that Vermont has a plan for addressing and solving Vermont's homelessness crisis.

Thank you for your consideration of our urgent request.

Sincerely,

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