

For the record, my name is Sarah Russell and I am the Special Assistant to End Homelessness for the City of Burlington and serve as co-chair for the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance. Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today about the house bill 91 and the GA Task Force Report as well as to share a local perspective on our on-the-ground experiences.

After reviewing H.91 and the GA-EHP Task Force Report side-by-side, I see the following as positive changes to policy:

- Expanded, season-long AWC
- Expanded AHS reporting
- Increased emphasis on a household's ability to remain in "home" district
- Mandated "written" notice (although the task force recommended that legal services/VTLA be included in the denial/appeal letters)
- A household may remain in program until outcome of appeal has been reached

I do not see where any substantial recommendations from the task force were incorporated. I will note that it's possible some of the report's recommendations could be "rules" and not included in the actual bill. Below are the questions/concerns I have for what has been presented in H.91:

- AWC: the bill does not specifically say that households do not need to meet categorical eligibility for seasonal shelter
- There is no mention of income contribution (not sure if this has been removed entirely or if this is a "rule" the administration will develop)
- Eligibility criteria does not align with what was submitted from the task force report. **At minimum:**
 - o Third trimester of pregnancy should be replaced with "pregnant"
 - o Incorporate the recommended language including DV/SV protections
- Max days of eligibility would be 90 days with <5% vacancy rate – while this shows some movement toward data-driven policy, it is a fraction of the amount of time that most households actually remain in a shelter program, and does not align with task force recommendations
- Participation by- and role of AHS has not been defined- which was one of the main pieces of the task force work (and encompassed several directives)

There are several reasons I see that additional thought needs to be given to the Emergency Shelter Program. As I am sure you are aware, the City of Burlington has been required to respond to unsheltered homelessness in an unprecedented way over this winter due to the alarmingly high rate of unsheltered homelessness – and the vulnerability of those who do not have access to shelter, especially during the winter months. Data indicates that approximately 257 people are sleeping outside at any given time this winter in Chittenden County. For context- last year we had about 180 people recorded as sleeping unsheltered; and the year prior there were about 40-60 people outside during the winter. This massive increase in unsheltered homelessness is a direct result of reductions in shelter opportunities through the motel program and an overall lack of shelter capacity locally and statewide. In response, with support from CVOEO, the City has opened an extreme cold weather shelter, decreasing the threshold temps the state deems eligible from -20 to -10 degrees. Under this expanded criteria, the City has opened the shelter for eight nights this winter, resulting in over 550 bednights with an average nightly census of 70 people. The medical, mental health, and substance use challenges this population has have shed light on the acuity of need among those sleeping outside.

In Chittenden County, AHS has shared that 88 households will be exited from the motels on April 1st if the BAA does not pass. There are at least 12 families with children included in this number. Last fall, the City was forced to make available temporary campsites for families to provide some level of safe camping for children – while certainly unacceptable to have children sleeping unsheltered, this will not be an option on April 1st – no child should be living in a tent in early spring in Vermont.

In addition to overnight shelters- we see an increased need for daytime spaces as well. People who are living unsheltered need low-barrier spaces to access resources, services, supplies, and meals. I learned recently that funding for the Community Resource Center in Burlington has been cut from the proposed FY26 budget. The CRC is our largest and most accessible daytime shelter and sees as many as 200 people in a single day. With funding support from the City, the CRC has been able to expand to provide weekend hours during the winter. We cannot lose this resource and I ask you to consider adequately funding daytime as well as overnight shelters for our communities.

I implore this committee and your colleagues in the legislature to seriously consider these impacts on not only the households this affects but the strain on municipalities and social service organizations who are stretched to the limit.

The lift to support people living unsheltered has become impossible – our numbers continue to rise while we continue to see decreases in funding – and in the State’s diminishing role in shelter provision.