

To: Chair Perchlik and Members of the Vermont Senate Committee on Appropriations

From: Vermont Emergency Shelter and Homeless Service Providers

Date: May 19, 2025

Subject: Critical Amendment Needed to Bill H.91 to Protect Vermont's HOP program

Dear Senators Perchlik, Brennan, Westman, Lyons, Baruth, Watson and Norris.

The Housing Opportunity Grant Program (HOP) is a high-performing, well-administered program providing community-based shelter and services to Vermonters experiencing homelessness. HOP keeps Vermont emergency shelters open and staffed. It supports our case managers working with people along a continuum from crisis, to emergency shelter, to permanent housing. While not the intent, language in H.91 **still** has the potential to destabilize this efficient network of integrated supports at a moment it needs to be strong.

H.91 appears to assume existing HOP activities and a new VHEARTH model for General Assistance cannot be integrated at the client level unless they are administered from or through the same entity. This is untrue. Unlike earlier in the pandemic, there are systems and partnerships to support such integration at the client level, regardless of how funding flows. In the course of a year, HOP-funded agencies serve thousands of clients in G.A. motels, provide many of them HOP resources to secure housing, and routinely connect them to longer-term supports needed beyond G.A. or HOP. This includes Family Supportive Housing, VHIP rental units through a local NeighborWorks partner, permanent supportive housing through a local housing trust, and rental subsidies through housing authorities. (The full list of connections we make would not fit on this page.)

Rearranging HOP funding streams or administrative pass-through for VHEARTH will hurt, not help, integration at the client level. Already H.91 has stressed the HOP network between Community Action Agencies and other nonprofit shelter and service providers. We support the Legislature and our community partners in efforts to reimagine GA funding and how it is put to use. As service providers, we would like to be at that table. However, for this to work, the HOP program must be removed from H.91's concept for re-designing General Assistance.

We suggest amending H.91 with the following changes:

- Page 4, lines 11 and 12, strike: *"and the Housing Opportunity Grant Program beginning in fiscal year 2028."*
- Page 20, strike section 2202 (1) and replace with:
"(1) replace the provision of emergency housing through the General Assistance Program established in chapter 21 of this title and use funds and resources previously

attributed to this program to fund the Vermont Homeless Emergency Assistance and Responsive Transition to Housing Program established in this chapter; and”

- Pages 33 and 34, strike all of section 11 (2), and section 12.

Rather than lock-in changes to the administration of the HOP program and risk damaging one of Vermont’s most effective and efficient programs that shelters and serves Vermonters experiencing homelessness, we suggest, instead, convening a study committee in the summer of 2027 to consider questions such as:

1. *Whether transitioning the Housing Opportunity Grant Program funding and duties to the VHEARTH Program would reduce administrative costs connected with administering the Housing Opportunity Grant Program;*
2. *Whether the Community Action Agencies would more effectively and efficiently administer the Housing Opportunity Grant Program;*
3. *How transitioning the Housing Opportunity Grant Program funding and duties to the VHEARTH Program would impact the ability of the Program to provide consistent and effective technical assistance and monitoring across all Vermont jurisdictions;*

This timeline would allow an opportunity for the CAPs to operate the GA portion of VHEARTH for a full year while administrative capacity, community coordination, and outcomes are assessed. We believe these suggestions represent a path forward through a transformation of the G.A. program that is less disruptive to people experiencing homelessness and the community-based organizations experienced in serving them.

Thank you,

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Jonathan Farrell, Executive Director, COTS

Julie Bond, Executive Director, Good Samaritan Haven

Michael Redmond, Executive Director, Upper Valley Haven (Northern Windsor and Orange)

Kim Anetsberger, Executive Director, Lamoille Community House

Constance S. Anderson, Executive Director, Northeast Kingdom Youth Services

Susan Whitmore, Executive Director, John Graham Housing & Services

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