

To: The Senate Committee on Appropriations
From: Alex Karambelas, Policy Advocate, ACLU of Vermont
Re: BAA GA Emergency Housing
Date: 2/10/25



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The American Civil Liberties Union of Vermont urgently encourages the legislature to extend the Adverse Weather Conditions policy for General Assistance (GA) emergency housing until the end of the fiscal year on June 30th. This extension will ensure that the most vulnerable Vermonters are able to remain sheltered while the state works towards long-term solutions during this legislative session. We urge the legislature to act from a place of compassion and courage, and to understand the gravity of this policy decision.

Individuals currently accessing the GA emergency housing program that would be subject to this extension are our most vulnerable neighbors. Last year, [Act 113](#) limited access to emergency housing year-round only to populations that met the legislature's criteria of being at the highest risk. This includes individuals with verified disabilities, families with children, older Vermonters above the age of 65, pregnant individuals, and families fleeing domestic violence. Many individuals currently receiving GA emergency housing have medical needs such as medication that requires refrigeration, usage of oxygen machines, and use of wheelchairs. Exiting these families without a plan from the state is inhumane and will cause extreme suffering for Vermonters in need.

To be clear, extending the adverse weather conditions policy through June will allow only this vulnerable group of individuals to remain sheltered. Even without room caps currently active, hotel capacity limitations have prevented 466 eligible families from accessing the program, all of whom met at least one of the categories defined by the state as constituting extreme vulnerabilityⁱ. Increasing the number of qualifying, vulnerable households who cannot access the program is a policy choice that will skyrocket the number of families forced onto the streets come April. Specifically, at least 457 households, including 590 adults and 160 children, will lose access to the General Assistance Emergency Housing program when the emergency winter housing policy expiresⁱⁱ.

When the winter weather policy is not in effect, the GA program is currently capped at 1,100 rooms. Outside of this program, there currently exists only 618 shelter placements in the community statewide, which are entirely fullⁱⁱⁱ. To put that into context, the 2024 Point-in-Time count--a nationwide count of persons experiencing literal homelessness that occurs on a single, uniform day across the country--found that there were 3,458 unhoused Vermonters in a single night, including 737 children and 646 Vermonters age 55 or older^{iv}. Thus, the current strategy is one that knowingly leaves hundreds--if not thousands--of Vermonters without anywhere to go. It is unjust and it will not save the state money in the long term.

Without emergency housing available, individuals experiencing homelessness will likely be caught in what is referred to as the "institutional circuit", forced to cycle

between crisis services, state institutions, and the streets^v. The comparative daily cost to the state for these services, such as a stay in a psychiatric hospital (\$2,625), emergency room (\$1386), or a correctional facility (\$260), dwarf the daily cost of a motel stay (\$83)^{vi}. Not only does this reality harm the individuals and families caught within this cycle, it overburdens already strained state systems and forces municipalities to shoulder social service, public safety and other costs. As stated by a letter from Municipality leaders spanning from Rutland to Montpelier, “Managing the impact of rising homelessness has fallen on the shoulders of local governments and local service providers. Municipalities do not have the capacity, the expertise, the resources, or the formal authority to address many of the associated problems”^{viii}.



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Other than the GA emergency housing program, the only plan proposed by the state that will be available by April is the implementation of family shelters in two locations: Williston and Waterbury. With the goal of serving 17 families, these shelters do not plan to meet the current level of need and do not serve areas of the state with some of the highest GA emergency housing utilization rates.

This is particularly important given the administration’s unsuccessful effort to create four mass shelters in March 2024, which were fraught with issues. Last year’s effort provided warehouse-style shelter space consisting of rows of cots in each building for a period of seven days. The shelters did not meet basic needs such as providing storage or showers--and in one instance, failed to provide indoor bathrooms. Because of the lack of coordination and planning for the mass shelters, and the inhumane conditions of the shelters themselves, they were heavily underutilized. For at least one location, not a single individual showed up. The 4 temporary shelters cost \$50,000 a night to operate^{viii}. By contrast, continuing to offer motel rooms for families who had been accessing the GA program but were removed due to the end of winter weather eligibility would have amounted to a much less expensive cost of \$36,000 a night. Vermont should learn from the past and not make the same mistakes of funding more expensive projects that serve less people, with inadequate conditions.

The current reality highlights the need to fully fund the GA emergency housing program while the legislature works towards long term solutions, given the lack of alternative places for individuals to go, and an escalating statewide housing emergency. For some individuals, this policy choice may be one of life and death. As a result of recent limitations on our GA housing program, three Vermonters have tragically lost their lives in the last two months. The ACLU of Vermont wants the legislature to understand that their deaths were not inevitable, and to value the lives of those experiencing extreme hardship. We strongly encourage the legislature to remember that those impacted are our friends, our families, and our neighbors. Individuals deserve dignity and support in their times of greatest need.

Sincerely,

Alex Karambelas, Policy Advocate, ACLU of Vermont

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<https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2026/Workgroups/House%20Human%20Services/General%20Assistance%20and%20Emergency%20Housing/W~Chris%20Winters~General%20Assistance%20and%20Emergency%20Housing%20Program~1-10-2025.pdf>

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

iii Because Vermont is a shelter first state, these 618 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>.

iv <https://helpingtohousevt.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/2024-PIT-Report-final.pdf>

v <https://www.pathwaysvermont.org/programs/housing-first/>

vi

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2024/WorkGroups/House%20General/Budget/Proposed%20FY24%20State%20Budget/W~Hillary%20Melton~Pathways%20Vermont%20Housing%20First%20Statewide%20Proposal~2-23-2023.pdf>

vii <https://www.montpelier-vt.org/ArchiveCenter/ViewFile/Item/6219>

viii <https://vtdigger.org/2024/03/20/state-says-temporary-homeless-shelters-cost-50k-a-night/>



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