
Report to The Vermont Legislature

GENERAL ASSISTANCE EMERGENCY HOUSING REPORT In Accordance with 33 V.S.A. 2115

Submitted to: House Committee on Appropriations
House Committee on General and Housing
House Committee on Government Operations and
Military Affairs
House Committee on Human Services
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Senate Committee on Health and Welfare
Joint Fiscal Committee

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Introduction

The General Assistance Emergency Housing Program underwent significant changes during Fiscal Year 2024, reflecting the evolving needs and challenges faced by Vermonters. These changes were shaped by legislative acts, policy adjustments, and emergency responses to unforeseen events, all aimed at improving the effectiveness and reach of the program. Key developments included the introduction of the Emergency Housing Transition Benefit under Act 81, the reinstatement of pre-pandemic housing rules, the implementation of the Adverse Weather Conditions policy, and adjustments made through the Budget Adjustment Act of 2024. Additionally, the program's capacity was tested and expanded in response to the July 2023 floods, which necessitated urgent housing solutions for displaced residents. This report outlines these programmatic changes and their impacts, highlighting both the challenges encountered and the strengths demonstrated by the department in adapting to these dynamic circumstances.

Programs and Rules in Place in Fiscal Year 2024

Fiscal year 2024 included many programmatic changes for the General and Emergency Housing Program. Act 81 created the Emergency Housing Transition Benefit which began in July 2023. Simultaneously the pre-covid General Assistance Emergency Housing program rules were reinstated, with a modification to the definition of who is eligible under families with children to households that include children up to age 19. In November of 2023, Adverse Weather Conditions policy went into effect, which relaxed program rules through April 2024. In March 2024, the Budget Adjustment Act (BAA) extended the Emergency Housing Transition Benefit to end in June 2024. The BAA also expanded the definition of disability to include Vermonters who could demonstrate a disability through a form filled out by a medical professional, established an \$80 per night room cap, and suspended the 28- and 84-night maximum number of nights a household could be housed.

Act 81 Emergency Housing Transition Benefit

The passage of Act 81 created the Emergency Housing Transition Benefit. This benefit was intended to provide additional time for vulnerable Vermonters who had been served by the General Assistance Emergency Housing Program to locate alternative housing placements. This extended housing benefit was scheduled to end on April 1, 2024. The BAA of 2024 extended the benefit through June 30, 2024.

To be eligible for the benefit, households must have been housed in the Emergency Housing program the night of June 30, 2023, and must have met categorical eligibility criteria under the BAA. Categorical eligibility criteria under the BAA included households where a member was: fleeing DV, age 60 or older, a child up to the age of 18 (or 19 if the child was attending school), evicted from their rental unit, left their rental unit due to a health code violation, in receipt of SSI/SSDI, pregnant, experiencing fire/flood or other natural disaster.

Act 81 requires households to participate in coordinated entry and case management, attempt to locate their own alternative housing, and contribute 30 percent of their income towards their

own housing. Households that fail to meet any of the engagement requirements outlined in Act 81, decline the offer of an appropriate housing placement, or were asked to leave the hotel or motel due to misconduct, were no longer eligible for the Emergency Housing Transition Benefit.

General Assistance Emergency Housing Rules

On July 1, 2023, the pre-pandemic rules for General Assistance Emergency Housing were reinstated. Households were determined eligible through either a catastrophic situation or vulnerable population criteria.

To be eligible under a catastrophic situation, a household must be experiencing homelessness caused by: a fire, flood, or other natural disaster, fleeing domestic violence, court-ordered or constructive eviction, or the death of a spouse or minor child. Households eligible under catastrophic criteria are eligible for up to 84 nights of housing in a 12-month period.

To be eligible under vulnerable population criteria, a household must include a member who is: a child aged 18 or younger (age 19 if in school), age 65 or older, pregnant in the third trimester, or is disabled and in receipt of SSI/SSDI. Households eligible under vulnerable population criteria are eligible for up to 28 nights of housing in a 12-month period.

Prior to implementation of the rules on July 1, 2023, DCF submitted emergency rules to update the pre-pandemic rules. The changes submitted as part of the emergency rule were to 1) increase the age of a child to 18 (19 if in school) to be in-line with the age limit of other rule sets during the pandemic. Pre-pandemic the age limit was age 6 and under. 2) modified the income contribution calculation to be based on the average motel cost in the district as opposed to the lowest motel cost in the district. 3) update the income contribution calculation to align the needs standard with the current Reach Up needs standard.

Adverse Weather Condition Policy

The Adverse Weather Conditions policy relaxes eligibility criteria for Emergency Housing, enabling Vermonters who would otherwise be ineligible for the traditional General Assistance program, or who had exhausted their maximum number of nights in a 12-month period, to be housed during cold winter months.

The Adverse Weather Conditions policy went into effect on November 15, 2023. From November 15, 2023, to December 15, 2023, then again from March 15, 2024, to April 15, 2024, the program was weather dependent. Relaxed eligibility was provided when the temperatures in a district met specific weather criteria. From December 15, 2023, to March 15, 2024, Adverse Weather Conditions were in effect statewide regardless of weather conditions.

On March 15, 2024, The Department for Children and Families opened 4 emergency shelters located in Berlin, Brattleboro, Burlington, and Rutland. These shelters were designed to provide temporary assistance for the 347 households that were exiting the GA Emergency Housing program due to the end of the relaxed eligibility criteria under the Adverse Weather Conditions policy, and they saw very little use. The shelters were open from March 15th

through March 22nd. The number of individuals accessing these shelters in Berlin, Brattleboro, and Rutland ranged from 0-3 individuals per night. The Burlington shelter was utilized primarily by individuals who had been served by the cold weather low-barrier shelter that closed on March 15, 2024. Of the 37 individuals accessing this shelter on the busiest night, only a few (<5) of the individuals served were from the GA Motel program, consistent with other sites.

Budget Adjustment Act 2024

The Budget Adjustment Act (BAA) of 2024 mandated changes to the General Assistance Emergency Housing Program related to both program eligibility and motel payments.

The BAA extended eligibility by removing the maximum number of nights a household could be housed, extending the end date of the Emergency Housing Transition Benefit from March 31, 2024, to June 30, 2024, and expanding the definition of disabled to include households to include a member who has a qualifying disability or health condition as confirmed through a form completed by a medical provider. 277 households became eligible after March 15, 2024, due to the expanded disability definition.

The BAA also established an \$80 per night room cap. Language was included which allowed the Agency to enter into contractual agreements with a licensed hotel or motel to secure capacity and improve the quality/cleanliness of the facility. The Department entered into agreements from March 2024 through June 2024 with 20 hotels providing an additional \$10 per room per night to maintain capacity. An additional 51 hotels continued to work with the program without a contractual agreement.

July 2023 Flood

On July 10 – 11, 2023, the state of Vermont experienced catastrophic flooding as a result of heavy rainfall, submerging many communities. Households who have lost housing due to flooding meet eligibility criteria under the General Assistance Emergency Housing rules, and DCF was prepared to assist those without housing due to flooding. Due to the scale of the disaster, emergency shelters opened in many of the hardest hit communities. Initially, flood victims were referred to emergency shelters. As shelters closed or reached capacity, survivors without housing were granted General Assistance Emergency Housing. Additionally, FEMA aid was available to survivors. As survivors worked to access FEMA benefits, DCF granted extensions to the 84-day housing maximum under General Assistance housing rules to allow households to remain housed while FEMA processed their eligibility claims.

Program Strengths

During Fiscal Year 2024, the department implemented a software solution allowing front-line staff to process applications and generate authorizations/denials through a standard system. This system reduces redundant data entry, improves the accuracy of program reports, and compiles data elements not previously available. Prior to the implementation of this system, information regarding approved applications was manually entered and tracked via excel spreadsheets.

In September of 2023, ESD contracted with the RDI Corporation to add call center agents capable of processing applications for Emergency Housing benefits. RDI agents, based in Kentucky, were trained by ESD staff and quickly became proficient in processing Emergency Housing applications. This greatly reduced wait times for housing assistance on ESD phone lines, going from on average of 2 hours wait time to an average of 11 minutes resulting in better service to Vermonters experiencing homelessness.

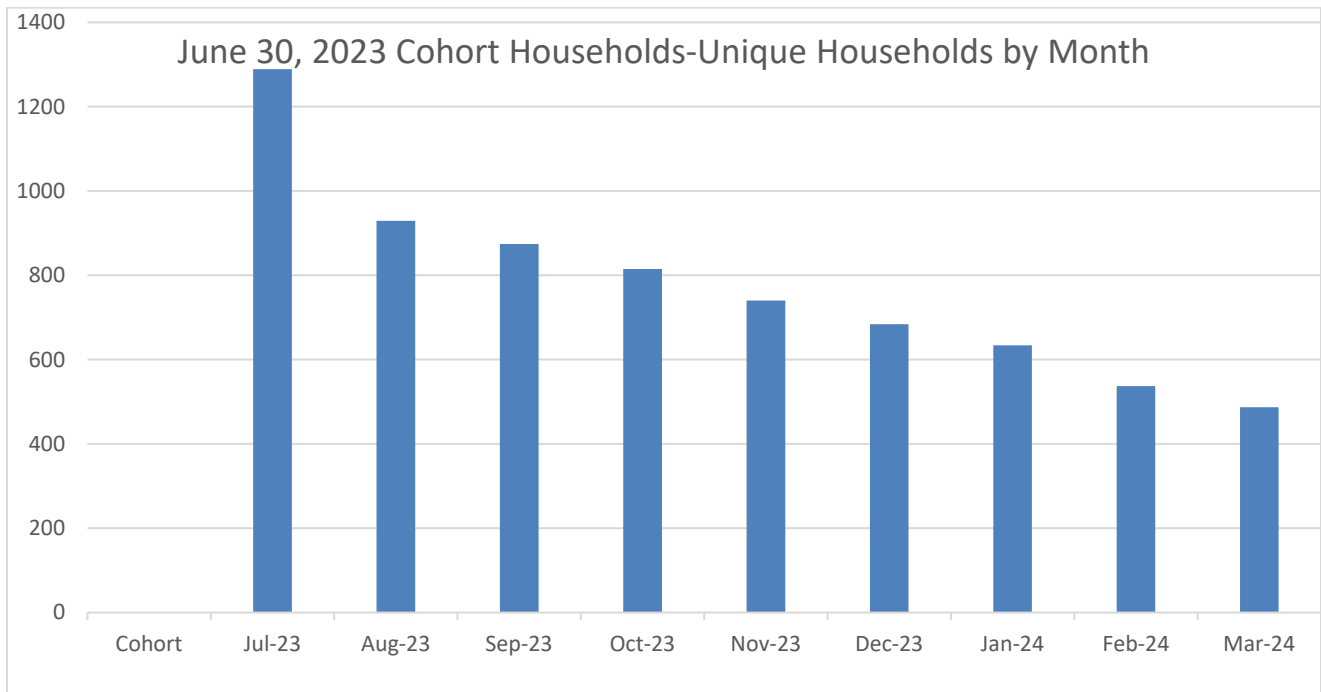
DCF continues to coordinate with the Food and Lodging Program within the Vermont Department of Health to encourage compliance with Licensed Lodging Establishment rule. When the Department of Health issues a temporary license or abatement order, ESD suspends placements until identified issues are resolved.

Communications to Vermonters in motels, partners, and motel owners has also been strengthened. Since March 2024, a total of 5 letters have gone to Vermonters both through physical mail and stuffings under motel room doors, 3 letters have gone to community providers, 3 community partner meetings have been held to share updates and take questions to help clarify the current rules or programs being implemented by both the Economic Services Division and the Office of Economic Opportunity, 2 letters to motels, and the Deputy Commissioner and Commissioner have attended 6 community meetings to discuss General Assistance Housing changes.

Conclusion

Fiscal Year 2024 was a pivotal year for the General Assistance Emergency Housing Program, marked by substantial legislative and policy changes that aimed to enhance support for vulnerable populations in Vermont. The introduction of new benefits, the reinstatement and modification of existing rules, and the swift response to natural disasters and adverse weather conditions showcased the department's commitment to addressing the diverse housing needs of Vermonters. The program's adaptability, bolstered by new technological solutions and external partnerships, improved its efficiency and service delivery, ensuring that those in need received timely assistance. As the program moves forward, the lessons learned from this year will be crucial in shaping future policies and strategies to further strengthen the safety net for Vermont's most vulnerable residents.

Appendix A: Emergency Housing Transition Benefit– Unique Households by Month



Appendix B: Emergency Housing Program – Unique Households by Month (All eligible categories, including Emergency Housing Transition Benefits)

