

To: The House Appropriations Committee  
From: Alex Karambelas, Policy Advocate ACLU of Vermont  
Re: *H. 91 An act relating to the Vermont Homeless Emergency Assistance and Responsive Transition to Housing Program*  
Date: 1/30/25

The ACLU of Vermont strongly supports the goals H. 91, a bill working to eliminate many issues of the state's current emergency housing program by creating a new regional system that has the potential to improve service delivery, coordination, and equity for current GA program participants.



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The failure to advance reforms that address Vermont's lack of housing stock and non-congregate shelter space has created a situation where affordable housing or accessible shelter is scarce and overburdened. [Research supports the conclusion](#) that housing supply and affordability- not mental illness, poverty, substance use disorder, or service availability- account for homelessness trends. While affordable housing scarcity affects all of us, older Vermonters, families, people with disabilities, and other vulnerable members of our communities are the most impacted. Unmanageable rents force more families into homelessness each year and limit the odds that those already without shelter can find a place to live. This in turn causes extreme suffering, distress, and a critical lack of safety or stability for impacted individuals and families.

The ACLU has a handful of recommendations for the Senate Health and Welfare committee as they review the bill. Overall, the ACLU of Vermont fully supports the recommendations of the GA task force and urges the legislature to incorporate their guidance into this bill and subsequent legislation. The following recommendations highlight key aspects of the task force recommendations and other solutions that should be incorporated (or remain unchanged) in H. 91.

***Ensure all Vermonters experiencing unsheltered homelessness have access to emergency shelter***

Housing is a human right, and all individuals experiencing homelessness deserve access to support that preserves their dignity and humanity. Lawmakers should ensure that core services are designed to meet the needs of all individuals experiencing homelessness--not just those that fit perspectives of who is deserving. While this is particularly true during cold winter months when risk of death by exposure is imminent, threats to health and safety exist for all homeless populations year-round.

We recommend that prioritization remain as a factor determined through the implementation plan. Should the committee decide to examine this issue, we strongly recommend that all individuals experiencing homelessness be *eligible* for shelter support, but that any *prioritization* of the "Temporary Shelter" program described in H. 91 (correlating with the current GA program) follows the recommendations of the GA Task



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Force, which used data-driven rationale to identify populations at the highest risks of collateral harms while experiencing homelessness. We recommend that current eligibility standards associated with the HOP program (the “Transitional Shelter” portion of H. 91) continue to remain available to broader populations.

### ***Addressing homelessness should remain a State responsibility***

Homelessness is a statewide issue affecting all communities across Vermont. While we believe the provision of shelter and supportive services could be more effective and humane when facilitated by community-based providers and experts, the State should not be absolved of its responsibility to address this issue. The State has a unique capacity to examine homelessness from a system-wide lens, incorporating the resources and tools available through all Agency of Human Services (AHS) departments representing populations experiencing homelessness. We recommend that the state, utilizing VHEARTH data collection, be responsible for: oversight; annual reporting; addressing emergent funding needs that may become apparent through community needs assessments or the presence of crises such as flooding; and addressing other factors impacting homeless populations, such as the availability of affordable housing, mental health care, substance misuse supports, childcare, and economic services.

### ***Allow Hotel/Motel rooms to be used by VHEARTH***

We strongly oppose any proposals that would exclude the allowable usage of individual hotel rooms in the VHEARTH program. The creation of available shelter space and affordable housing will take time to develop, and as such we recommend that CAP agencies are given multiple mechanisms to provide shelter. With only [655 shelter spaces currently available](#), and [3,458 people experiencing homelessness](#) across Vermont, ensuring that all tools are available is critical to the success of this program. Utilizing motel rooms within a program *alongside the provision of services and support* can drastically improve outcomes for impacted individuals.

### ***Provide GA program stability in FY26***

In order for the VHEARTH program to be successful, there must be GA program stability for this interim year. The state cannot build up an adequate solution with the chaos of un-sheltering happening at the same time. We ask that the legislature fund the current GA emergency housing program to its current threshold of \$44.5 million in FY26, to ensure that unhoused Vermonters defined as vulnerable by the state can maintain shelter through the GA Housing Program while the VHEARTH program is being designed and implemented. Retaining 80-day room caps within the GA program in FY26 will also harm community capacity to administer the VHEARTH program. If individuals are forced out of shelter prematurely, connections to services and long-term housing opportunities dissipate. Without resolving homelessness, individuals exited from programs are more likely to face catastrophic outcomes and continued reliance on shelter or other emergency support. This cycle works against policy goals of decreasing demand for emergency shelter, will worsen our homelessness crisis, and will weaken community capacity to respond successfully.



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### ***Ensure Reasonable Accommodations can be made***

People with disabilities are protected from discrimination and exclusion of housing, publicly available accommodations, and state programming through both federal and state law. Additionally, the law requires that reasonable accommodations must be made for any rule, policy, practice or service that may be necessary for a person with a disability to have an equal opportunity to use and enjoy a dwelling. Program requirements centered around accepting alternative shelter and housing must ensure that such placements are accessible to individuals with disabilities, do not mirror the harmful legacy of institutionalization, and comply with the Olmstead decision. To that end, any plan to build up shelter beds for specific populations should focus on particular beds for those accommodations, not separate facilities. While much of this is not applicable to H. 91, we wanted to highlight these mandates as the committee continues discussions.

### **Conclusion**

H. 91 is the most comprehensive plan put forward in years to address our statewide homelessness crisis. We urgently encourage the committee to pass this bill, and to support the CAP agencies with adequate funding and a workable timeline for this program. We are grateful to both the legislature, the agencies, and statewide community shelter providers for their work and commitment to address this issue.