

Date: April 15, 2025

To: Senator Virginia “Ginny” Lyons, Chair, Senate Committee on Health and Welfare

From: Vermont Emergency Shelter and Homeless Service Providers

Re: Profound Concerns with Bill H.91

Dear Chair Lyons and Members of the Committee,

While perhaps not the intention, H.91 *“An act relating to the Vermont Homeless Emergency Assistance and Responsive Transition to Housing Program”* has the effect of splitting and destabilizing a crucial network providing emergency shelter and services to Vermonters experiencing homelessness.

These shelters and services, largely supported through the Housing Opportunity (HOP) program in the State Office of Economic Opportunity, are not the cause of Vermont’s high rate of homelessness, nor are they to blame for perennial challenges associated with the state’s General Assistance (hotel/motel) program. The HOP program and network is the primary reason the number of Vermonters living in motels is not higher.

HOP funding supports multiple eligible activities, allowing communities to invest in interventions with the greatest impact for the local population at-risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. Access to services is streamlined through a HUD-required Coordinated Entry system. Partners and activities are coordinated through existing local Continua of Care groups. HOP standards are set by the state and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Results are reported quarterly. Oversight, onsite monitoring, desk reviews and technical assistance provided by the State Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) ensure this network remains high-performing.

H.91’s foundational flaw is to conflate the turmoil and unpredictability of the G.A. program with a high-performing HOP network providing essential services to vulnerable Vermonters. If the Vermont Legislature is eager to go a different direction with General Assistance, replacing the current ESD-run model with regional block grants, that is one thing, but adding the HOP program to that untried recipe would have terrible results.

H. 91 supports the State’s slow abdication as backstop for ensuring homeless Vermonters have appropriate access to shelter, in lieu of block-granting funds to regional monopolies. It appears to eliminate, or severely curtail, the unit of state government (Vermont OEO) providing technical assistance, funding, and quality control across a complex system of care. While it might seem appealing in the short term for nonprofit providers to receive more funding with less oversight and fewer performance measures, it seems unlikely this approach would result in effective programs for Vermonters in crisis in the long term.

H.91 relies on magical thinking in its creation of a new Implementation Advisory Committee to sort through some of the troublesome questions it creates. We know from experience this approach struggles with effective decision-making related to something as charged as the provision of emergency shelter and services.

H.91 sets Vermont back years in terms of consistent and clear definitions of “homelessness” and “at-risk of homelessness” as it relates to eligibility. While it can feel good to open the door wider, the Legislature should understand these proposed definitions take that door off its hinges. This bill would actually increase homelessness as measured and reported in Vermont, while making it harder to prioritize people more at risk of being unsheltered on the street over someone with options to stay with a family member.

H.91 fails to address actual root causes for the staggering number of people in Vermont’s state-funded hotel/motel rooms across the state. We would welcome a hard look at adjacent systems of care such as mental health, supports for older Vermonters, corrections, and access to truly affordable housing.

H.91 was developed by a small group in a process where testimony was largely suppressed. Only Vermont’s five regional Community Action Agencies and their lobbyist were given an opportunity to provide input. This did not allow for a complete understanding of either the current G.A. program or the high-performing HOP program. Conflicts of interest may not have been adequately disclosed.

We value the roles of Vermont’s five Community Action Agencies in our homeless continuum of care as well as their essential anti-poverty role. While the CAP agencies have different levels of experience in the provision of emergency shelter and services, we believe all are committed to improving conditions for low-income Vermonters. This is done through the operation of programs such as Head Start, Weatherization, fuel and food assistance and other locally-developed initiatives. To be clear, we support the current mission and work of the CAPs. The issue is that the CAPs are not in a position to speak for the dozens of providers operating around the state for whom the prevention of homelessness and provision of emergency shelter and services is the primary mission.

If H.91 were enacted as is, it would quickly become apparent where these and other flaws are. It is hard to recall a piece of Vermont human services legislation which has suffered so badly from a small group racing forward without appropriate input from experts and practitioners. We respectfully urge your committee to take a hard look at this legislation; ask questions about the content, process and end goals; and invite witnesses with a track record of doing this work in Vermont. H.91 should not go forward as written.

It takes years to build up strong programs, strong organizations and strong networks that can provide high-quality services to so many Vermonters in need. H.91 in its current form would upend that. There are things Vermont’s General Assembly could do to improve the General Assistance program. They are by no means easy or they would have been done years ago. Uprooting an effective statewide HOP program ignores the source of the problem and seems focused on rearranging deck chairs.

Respectfully,

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