



May 14, 2025

The Honorable Sen. Virginia "Ginny" Lyons, Chair  
Senate Committee on Health and Welfare  
Vermont State Senate  
115 State Street  
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

Dear Chair Lyons,

I'm writing to you today with regards to H.91. I am the Executive Director of the Upper Valley Haven, an organization that provides substantial services to people who are unhoused, including shelter. I appreciate the work of your committee to closely review this bill and make the changes in its language that will improve its chances of success upon implementation. While I am in support of the intent of this bill and some of its ideas, I am writing to you today in the hope that you will support an important change to this bill which I consider essential. I am joined by the other shelter providers across the state in this request in which a provision of the current version of the legislative language will be removed with an alternative idea offered.

While I support many of the ideas in H.91 to transfer the operations of the current GA Emergency Housing program to the CAP agencies, the additional provision to include funding for Vermont's Housing Opportunity Program that would be provided to the CAP agencies should be removed from the legislation language. As you know, this inclusion of HOP funding first appeared in the House version of H.91 without any consultation with the organizations that provide services through this funding. Little to no consideration was given to the current system of shelter and other services provided through HOP funding or to listen to the voices of the organizations that receive this funding.

Your committee, the Senate Committee on Health and Welfare, has allowed more testimony from interested parties, including the Housing and Homelessness Alliance of Vermont, but some basic concepts including the inclusion of HOP funding in this bill remain largely unexamined, I believe. For example, the organizations that provide shelter and related services that follow HUD-required regulations have an exemplary record of keeping people safe, connecting them to essential services and helping them find permanent housing. Last year, the Haven helped place 93 households in housing and assisted another 50 households who were at risk of losing their housing. The Office of Economic Opportunity has done a stellar job of providing administration, technical assistance, managing funding and overall systems improvement including safety for all. It is not clear to me why this system which is working needs to be risked through a largely unexamined decision?

The organizations funded through the HOP program are the backbone of the services provided to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in Vermont. We provide shelter in multiple models with 655 beds available to people in need. We administer the Coordinated Entry program which ensures that there is a consistent and fair allocation of available services to people most in need. We provide the outreach services to help identify people who are unhoused and unsheltered to connect them with systems and services. We provide supportive housing services that help formerly homeless individuals and families remain housed. We manage the Homeless Management Information Systems providing the data required by HUD and that informs OEO of service volumes, efficiency of resources and performance outcomes.

I would also point out that several shelter expansion projects are underway in Vermont, including a project by the Upper Valley Haven in Hartford. We have raised significant private funding to construct a new shelter and resource center to provide a safe place to sleep and to also help people find permanent housing, a skill in which we are very proficient. We undertook this shelter expansion with the understanding from OEO that the shelter and day services would be included in ongoing operating funding. The proposed legislation that would eliminate OEO oversight and program administration places this at risk.

The CAP agencies have little to no experience providing this level of administration or financial management. Many are not involved in providing shelter or having knowledge of HUD regulations. They do not have a historical statewide perspective on issues as they are focused on their respective regions. And that some do provide shelter services is a clear conflict of interest of being an administrator and service provider.

I was encouraged by the idea first offered by Senator Gulick and affirmed by DCF Commissioner Chris Winters last Friday in his comments on H.91 to the Senate Health and Welfare Committee to move forward on the decision regarding HOP funding with information and deliberation by including new language to form a study committee as an alternative to blindly moving forward. He stated that the Administration would not oppose moving a potential HOP transition to a study committee.

This reasonable request would allow the consideration of additional discussion and information not available at present including the success of the transition of the GA Emergency Housing program to CAP administration and the impact of any cuts to federal funding or rule changes. Both you and Vice Chair Senator Gulick expressed thanks for Commissioner Winters' lifting up that important option for the Committee as a positive way to move the bill forward in a way that brings the state's shelter providers together in support.

A study committee would be able to consider the merits of this idea and compare any possible gains in service coordination with the existing record of achievement by the organizations that currently receive HOP funding with administrative oversight by the Office of Economic Opportunity. The opportunity for a thorough review of the idea will determine the best path for the future to achieve the goals of this legislation.

Here are some essential questions that could be answered in a study committee formed after the transition of the GA Emergency Housing Program to VHEARTH.

1. Whether transitioning the Housing Opportunity Grant Program funding and duties to the Vermont Homeless Emergency Assistance and Responsive Transition to Housing 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 and are they ready to do this in addition to the responsibilities of managing an emergency housing program.
3. How transitioning the Housing Opportunity Grant Program funding and duties to the Vermont Homeless Emergency Assistance and Responsive Transition to Housing Program would impact the ability of the Program to provide consistent and effective technical assistance and monitoring across all Vermont jurisdictions;
4. How transitioning the Housing Opportunity Grant Program funding and duties to the Vermont Homeless Emergency Assistance and Responsive Transition to Housing Program would effectively integrate with the existing homelessness response infrastructure coordinated through the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance and the VT Balance of State Continuum of Care, including its Local Housing Coalitions; and
5. The impacts of potential federal funding cuts around affordable housing and homelessness response and prevention on a potential transition of the Housing Opportunity Grant Program to the Vermont Homeless Emergency Assistance and Responsive Transition to Housing Program.

My hope is that you will agree with this commonsense suggestion and work with your fellow Senators to see that this change in legislative language is implemented. Shelter providers have developed substitute legislative language for this idea that we can share.

Thank you for your consideration of this idea. I would be happy to discuss this further in the remaining mark-up session of the Committee.

Sincerely,



Michael Redmond  
Executive Director

Cc: Sen. Martine Larocque Gulick, Vice Chair