

**Testimony for the Senate Health & Welfare Committee**  
**Julie Bond, Executive Director**  
**Good Samaritan Haven**  
**April 25, 2025**

For the record, my name is Julie Bond, I am the Executive Director of Good Samaritan Haven, a shelter network serving those experiencing homelessness in Washington county and the broader central Vermont region.

Thank you for the opportunity to share feedback on how the proposed H.91 bill may be operationalized, particularly regarding potential shifts in the administration of the Housing Opportunity Program (HOP) from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to regional resource organizations.

Good Samaritan Haven, in partnership with 14+ shelter providers around the state, see opportunities to improve on the GA delivery model. However, we are unable to advocate for the current version of H.91 which undermines the existing state-administered HOP program that provides shelter and essential services to so many Vermonters. The HOP program must be removed from H.91's concept for re-designing General Assistance.

The HOP program funds 35 non-profit organizations around the state, which provide 683 emergency shelter beds through a well functioning shelter system. The state HOP program works well in serving to centrally administer, monitor and provide accountability, standards of care and expertise to shelter providers. We all deeply believe in the strength and efficacy of this structure.

For local context about the services provided in Washington county, Good Samaritan Haven operates four shelters with a capacity of 82 emergency beds, serving adults, 18-80+ years old. We provide motel support, street outreach and a seasonal day space & warming shelter.

In FY 2024 Good Sam sheltered 249 individuals in emergency shelters. We housed 29 people from shelter (which, in this housing crisis, is an achievement). We provided housing navigation to 91 households in the motels. Fourteen of those households were rehoused, or 15% of those served. Our street outreach team supported 76 individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness outdoors last year. Finally, we have a team of housing case managers to help people meet their goals within and across this entire system. Altogether, Good Sam serves between 450-500 people annually and employs 55 people in this challenging and complex work.

Vermont's most recent point-in-time count noted 3,500 people experiencing homelessness. This is understood to be an undercount. Vermont still needs 2,800 emergency beds to 'break even' with the need. This volume of response requires investment in the most vulnerable adults in our state, not less investment. Privatizing the homelessness support system to the five regional entities currently being explored, will add additional administrative costs where the focus needs be on placing more financial resources into shelter and temporary housing options, not less funding. This bill risks diluting direct action funds when they are needed the most.

There are certainly hopes to refine and re-envision the General Assistance & motel program as it has grown and evolved through the Covid era. However, until there are more than 683 emergency, temporary, or transitional beds to serve the roughly 3,500 people in Vermont experiencing homelessness, there will always need to be an overflow mechanism. Currently this mechanism is the motel program and it serves a purpose to keep our most vulnerable Vermonters housed and alive until enough other tangible options exist.

The proposed H.91 bill raises significant concerns. Among them is the concern that shifting responsibility for emergency, transitional and permanent supportive housing into the private sector is an abdication of state responsibility for a vital

program that serves Vermont's most vulnerable residents. It mirrors a broader national trend in which federal and state governments are stepping back from their historic roles in maintaining the social safety net, increasingly defunding and dismantling systems of public care.

Washington County—and Vermont more broadly—has diverse ecosystems of service providers, each with distinct expertise and approaches to this work. Each organization is a critical part of this network (we are all partners), providing shelter, case management, and emergency assistance. The strength of the local system is in its interdependence, which fosters accountability and balance. Granting a single entity authority *over* rather than *with* the broader network risks destabilizing the safety net for those who need it most.

A non-state, regional community-based approach also runs the risk of a lack of separation of duties, a deep loss of state institutional knowledge and expertise, and further distances the state from the realities of those experiencing cycles of poverty, persistent medical or mental health burdens and homelessness. This approach could accelerate the erosion of public accountability in favor of fragmented and under-resourced local solutions, leaving individuals and communities without the consistent support they need.

Sixteen shelter providers across the state support keeping the HOP program under the Office of Economic Opportunity. The HOP program is not broken, it is functioning well and it is the backbone of emergency shelter provision in this State. Under state oversight, OEO management of the HOP program provides strong program integrity, ensures compliance with guidelines, monitors shelters, and upholds habitability standards.

There is a growing narrative, influenced by recent federal reductions, that all government systems are broken and must be rapidly replaced — often without due consideration for the vulnerable individuals who rely on them, or the providers doing the daily work. Dismantling existing efforts without the involvement of providers, or without adequate time and intention to envision

efficient and logical change will ultimately jeopardize the continuity of care and access to essential services.

There is great need for additional shelter bed capacity, transitional and supportive housing, voucher provision and other housing support services in the state, not less - 2800 people in the motels would greatly benefit from this increased capacity. We, the providers in the state, already provide these services and are keen to do more if we had the resources. The concern with administering these programs regionally creates 5 times the amount of administrative costs, when GA funds and HOP funds could be focused, combined and administered through one state-wide entity. In a time when federal funding is so tenuous, we should be thinking about the most efficient management strategies possible, and the ways to enhance and stretch dollars to house the most people we can.

If H.91 must move forward, we urge the removal of the HOP program from the bill and simply focus on assessing and overhauling the GA program itself. However, there still needs to be adequate funding and plans to house these 2800 people in the meantime.

I greatly appreciate the committee hearing this testimony today. It's important to note that the homelessness service providers across the state have not been meaningfully consulted in the construction of this overall bill or the concepts of operationalizing it – which is deeply concerning. The proposed changes would have profound consequences, yet the voices of those providing vital emergency shelter and services have not been adequately heard or included in the process. We are also experts in this field. We also provide these services and already know what is needed in our communities to meet the need. Needs assessments are not needed. Investment in capacity at the provider level is what is needed.

Providers also do not accept the premise around this bill that the G.A. and HOP programs can only be integrated if the money is all in one place. We integrate programs every day for clients which are administered from disparate locations:

(FSH, Shelter + CARE, HOP, VHIP, etc.). We do it through Coordinated Entry and the continuum of care, which were designed specifically for this purpose.

Please consider changing the following language in the H.91 bill if it is to be considered and move forward:

Please consider removing the HOP program from the H.91 bill's language and focus on an assessment and overhaul of the GA program only if this bill is to be considered and moved forward.

Ultimately, maintaining emergency, transitional and permanent supportive housing under state administration remains the best option.

I urge you not to move forward with this bill out of a need to “do something”, but rather to deeply consider the feedback of the shelter provider network of the State of Vermont and our firm belief that the shelter system does not need privatization or consolidation. It needs further support and additional capacity to do the work we are willing and able to do to grow services around the state. The fact that a program lives within the state government does not mean it is broken, inefficient, or outdated. Rather, we are collectively feeling the accumulated impact of over 40 years of federal divestment in the social safety net. Vermont has an opportunity to lead by example—not by dismantling state-managed programs that are working—but by assuming its responsibility to equitably distribute resources to those who are most vulnerable in our communities.

State shelter providers see opportunities to improve on the GA delivery model. However, we will have trouble advocating on the H.91 bill if the existing HOP and shelter system is under threat. I include in my testimony for your reference, my previous testimony to the House Human Service Committee; our shelter group's memo about the language mark-up suggestions to H.91; and our shelter group's commentary about the bill. We are united in these views and I thank you for your time and for considering our collective voice around this issue.

**Commentary:**  
**Vermont Shelter Providers on new Homeless Legislation**  
**Overhaul Risks Existing Successful Programs**

We are shelter and homeless service providers throughout the State of Vermont writing to express our concerns with bill H.91, commonly known as VHEARTH, which was referenced in the VT Digger article on [dissolving the motel program](#).

When homelessness is discussed in Vermont the spotlight is frequently trained on the General Assistance (G.A.) program. Some criticize G.A. (often referred to as the hotel/motel program) for “warehousing” people without a long-term plan. Others argue it provides shelter to vulnerable individuals who would otherwise be on the streets at-risk of exposure. Some feel the eligibility is too lax, others too strict; that it spends too much, that it’s underfunded. For over two decades many of us in the fields of housing, homelessness and anti-poverty work have been pulled into a parade of task forces, advisory groups, and councils charged with finding an elusive compromise.

That tension provides context, but it’s not what we’re here to opine on. This session, a House committee is proposing another transformation of the polarizing G.A. program. It involves the state pulling back from its role as operator and providing block-grant funding to five designated community organizations. The legislation leaves much to be sorted out and creates yet another advisory group for that purpose.

As with eligibility, there are pros and cons with a regional alternative to G.A. But a few lines in H.91 would simultaneously eliminate a less-well-known program, the Housing Opportunity Grant Program (HOP). HOP is a high-performing grant that provides the lion’s share of funding for community-based shelters and services for Vermonters experiencing homelessness. HOP funding keeps shelters open and staffed. It supports case managers working with people along a continuum from crisis, to emergency shelter, to permanent housing. HOP is the funding that pays for security deposits and back rent to Vermont landlords to support tenancies. It’s the program that keeps Vermonters out of G.A. motels through effective eviction prevention programs. HOP also gets people out of G.A. motels and into community-based shelter apartments and permanent housing. Last year HOP funds assisted 39 non-profit organizations in Vermont. This sheltered 3,200 Vermonters. It provided over \$4 million in security deposits, back rent and rental assistance to stabilize 2,246 Vermont households who were homeless or at imminent risk. HOP does all this and more which is why we are advocating for its preservation.

We ask Vermonters--residents, legislators, landlords, partners—to look closely at this legislation which we feel has the potential to destabilize a network of high-performing shelters and services at a moment it needs to be strong. The chaotic federal landscape is not projected to make things easier for operators or to reduce the need for emergency shelters. We ask that people not paint with the same brush the G.A. program and the Housing Opportunity Program. We ask that a proven and high-performing HOP

program be held harmless from the next experiment with re-envisioning General Assistance, and that the Legislature affirm and direct the State to uphold and support the State Office of Economic Opportunity and important role they play in serving our most vulnerable neighbors.

In recent testimony, we heard H.91 described as 'bold'. Transitioning General Assistance from a centralized, state program to a regional model administered by select nonprofits might warrant the adjective 'bold.' But attempting that while destabilizing Vermont's existing shelters and services supported through the HOP program sounds more like 'reckless.'

We support the Legislature and our community partners in efforts to re-imagine G.A. funding and how it is put to use. As service providers, we would like to be at that table. We support harnessing the full capacity of the State Departments of Health, Health Access, Mental Health, Disabilities Aging and Independent Living, and Corrections in creating meaningful, transformative support systems for our most vulnerable neighbors. The people we serve day in and day out with severe health issues, debilitating substance use disorder, and chronic mental health issues have been pushed from other systems of care in the name of cost savings and driven into our shelters and motels. We further support the use of G.A. funds to bolster successful programs such as HOP and others that are helping Vermonters and are already not fully funded. This type of action will truly help the most vulnerable in our communities and would be bold. H.91 as written is not bold, it is reckless. The HOP program must be removed from H.91's concept for re-designing General Assistance.

Signed,

*Angus Chaney, Executive Director, Homeless Prevention Center*

*Jonathan Farrell, Executive Director, COTS*

*Julie Bond, Executive Director, Good Samaritan Haven*

*Kim Anetsberger, Executive Director, Lamoille Community House*

*Libby Bennett, Executive Director, Groundworks Collaborative*

*Michael Redmond, Executive Director, Upper Valley Haven*

*Constance S. Anderson, Executive Director, Northeast Kingdom Youth Services*

*Susan Whitmore, Executive Director, John Graham Housing & Services*

*Lee Trapani, Executive Director, Springfield Supported Housing Program*

*Jeanne L. Montross, Executive Director, HOPE*

*Heidi Lacey, Executive Director, Charter House Coalition*

*Russell Bradbury-Carlin, Executive Director, Interaction Youth Services and Restorative Justice*

*Mark Redmond, Executive Director, Spectrum Youth and Family Services*

**Date:** April 22, 2025

**To:** Senator Virginia Lyons, Chair, Senate Committee on Health and Welfare

**Re:** Distilling Provider Concerns with Bill H.91

Dear Chair Lyons and Members of the Committee,

We appreciate that your Committee is eager to move substantive changes through bill H.91. On behalf of the following community-based organizations providing emergency shelter and essential services to Vermonters experiencing homelessness, we wish to present our top concerns in a unified voice.

We, the undersigned state shelter providers, see opportunities to improve on the GA delivery model. However, we are unable to advocate for the current version of H.91 which undermines an existing HOP network providing shelter and essential services to so many Vermonters. The HOP program must be removed from H.91's concept for re-designing General Assistance.

We understand H.91 is a complicated bill and welcome opportunities to testify if the committee would like.

Sincerely,

*Angus Chaney, Executive Director, Homeless Prevention Center*

*Jonathan Farrell, Executive Director, COTS*

*Julie Bond, Executive Director, Good Samaritan Haven*

*Kim Anetsberger, Executive Director, Lamoille Community House*

*Libby Bennett, Executive Director, Groundworks Collaborative*

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*Lee Trapeni, Executive Director, Springfield Supported Housing Program*

*Jeanne L. Montross, Executive Director, HOPE*

*Heidi Lacey, Executive Director, Charter House Coalition*

*Roxanne M. Carelli, Executive Director of Operational Development and Shelter Services,  
Bennington County Coalition for the Homeless*

*Karissa L. Myers, Executive Director of Communications and Outreach Services  
Bennington County Coalition for the Homeless*

*Mark Redmond, Executive Director, Spectrum Youth and Family Services*

*Russell Bradbury-Carlin, Executive Director, Interaction Youth Services and Restorative Justice*



**Testimony for the House Human Services Committee**  
**Julie Bond, Executive Director**  
**Good Samaritan Haven**  
**February 18, 2025**

For the record, my name is Julie Bond, I am the Executive Director of Good Samaritan Haven, a shelter network serving those experiencing homelessness in Washington county and the broader central Vermont region.

Thank you for inviting me to address Good Samaritan Haven's work and impact in the community and to provide any specific feedback about potential solutions to the housing/shelter crisis.

For context, Good Samaritan Haven operates four shelter facilities with a capacity of 82 emergency beds, serving adult individuals, 18-80+ years old. An intentional and very important feature of our program is that it functions as a continuum of shelter care and services for the unhoused. Our shelters provide a range of access from a very low barrier seasonal congregate shelter in Montpelier to a low barrier semi-congregate shelter in Barre to semi-private rooms in our shelter in Berlin, to semi-private rooms in a Recovery Oriented Shelter in the Town of Barre. This is a hybrid shelter/recovery home model for those in recovery from substance use disorder.

Our staff provides housing navigation and support services in the motels. We also operate a seasonal warming space/day program in Montpelier for unsheltered individuals. Our street outreach team engages with the 75-100+ unsheltered people in Washington county by providing life-supporting supplies, services and connection. Finally, our Housing Navigation and Case Management Team helps our guests obtain what they need whether it be ID's, health care referrals, training and education, transportation, employment or affordable

housing when available. Altogether, Good Sam employs 55 people in this challenging and complex work.

In our experience, one size does not fit all in assisting the unhoused. Our guest population is incredibly diverse. We serve an adult population with a deep complexity of needs. Close to half our guests are impacted by mental health conditions - most often moderately but sometimes profoundly. 86% of our guests report some form of disability - physical/medical/mental health/developmental. Older individuals (55+) who are seeking shelter for the first time, now account for at least 50% of our shelter occupancy (a demographic shift that suggests a looming increase in older folks who will experience homelessness, which is anticipated to peak by 2030).

Nearly half of our guests struggle with Substance Use Disorder; there are also many who are in recovery or do not use substances at all. Many have impacts related to involvement with the correctional system. Most have very limited or no income at all. Overarching all is an extremely tight housing market with few low cost options.

This fall, when the impacts of the changes to the motel program resulted in ultra vulnerable adults and children being put to the street after their 80 days of motel stays had run out, shelter providers fell into deep crisis alongside those losing their motel stays. This destabilization of the system threatened the lives of many, prevented and distracted shelters from serving people in their normal way, and resulted in deep strain and moral injury placed upon vulnerable Vermonters and Vermont's emergency shelter providers. Good Sam mobilized with End Homelessness Vermont and several local churches in Montpelier and Barre to take action by raising funds from individuals and foundations to extend motel stays and shelter to 76 individuals, including 14 families with 19 children, from September 19, 2024 through December 1, 2024.

Examples of those assisted through this motel bridging effort include:

- Blind woman with a newborn avoiding sleeping in a tent
- Grandmother with sole custody of an autistic grandchild
- Gentleman with a traumatic brain injury relying on oxygen
- Wheelchair-bound individual with multiple serious health conditions
- Older woman suffering from chronic, debilitating back pain

Despite these herculean efforts, several people still died. The decision making process to triage how to extend motel stays for individuals with these levels of complex conditions fell on the shoulders of - often times, just me - and this nearly killed me. That is a level of moral injury that one person should not have to bear alone. Were it not for our already established partnership with End Homelessness Vermont and community partners, many more people would have died in our community. And let me be clear - this was not a solution that we should have even had to entertain. We were responding to a policy-made crisis and it was the only ethical solution we felt existed. This must never. happen. again. As such, I implore you to ensure that there is no cap on the number of days people have in the motel program and no cap on the number of rooms. It will destroy the state's shelter infrastructure staff as well those feeling the shun of having nowhere to go but outside.

**The following are suggestions for how to wage sustainable and beneficial change in the state's shelter system and emergency housing programs:**

**Engage in parallel change:** please do not shutter one program without having another waiting in the wings, completely ready to begin, or in fact having already begun. Do not create another cliff for us to perish upon.

**Please ask shelter providers for their ideas, feedback and plans:** Many shelter providers submitted \$30M in proposals last July 2024 requesting shelter

expansion funds for projects that they already have in development. I repeat - our organizations have our own strategic development priorities - we know what is needed in our communities, and we simply need the funds and flexibility to expend the funds across budget cycles to make them happen. Good Sam alone submitted \$9M in requests for shelter expansion projects which were not funded - including our plans for a complex care shelter and a year round shelter in Montpelier. If either of these projects had been funded in July, we would be very close to having 60-70 additional shelter beds in the region by now. Please take into consideration what is already in the development pipeline by shelter providers vs. untested solutions.

**General Assistance Emergency Shelter must be a back stop:** Until there is capacity for our state's service providers to handle the need, and in order to ensure that our state does not see a crisis of unsheltering again, GA emergency shelter must continue. We support the General Assistance Emergency Housing Taskforce recommendations for this part of the sheltering program. This with parallel action to expand our shelter and housing infrastructure can work to lower the level of crisis and begin to move our state forward.

**Creating large, congregate shelters is not the answer.** They are incredibly difficult to manage, it is not humane for anyone, let alone people with deep complexities, and it should not be considered as a long-term solution. This type of sheltering is only meant for 3-7 days situations, like our recent string of floods and operated by Red Cross partners. Large congregate shelters are not appropriate for what inevitably ends up being 9 months to 2+ years of shelter living while waiting for permanent housing.

**Please take into consideration that local shelter providers want to help:** we want to expand capacity, but we must be able to do so in sustainable ways. We

can only expand and staff programs safely and appropriately if we have BOTH the operational funds AND the administrative support to make it happen. No organization can expand precipitously without administrative support to ground its operations. HOP funds, which fund shelter operations, do not fund shelter administration. This is not sustainable and must be reconsidered if we want local shelter providers to be part of the long-term solution vs. out of state contractors. There must also be flexibility in spending funds for the purposes of expanding shelter capacity that is not hemmed in by rigid budget cycles.

**Please communicate with local shelter providers:** if very short term weather related shelters are being considered to be put up in the area, be in touch with local shelter operators so we could potentially be part of the solution, or simply in the know that a resource is being mobilized. We are all in this together.

**Consider shelters and other models of care for specific populations:** It can be helpful to focus on the creation of shelters for specific needs, such as complex health needs, families with children, recovery oriented shelters. However, please do not lose sight of the fact that more group homes for those with mental health or developmental disabilities must be created. And it is imperative that more focus is placed on getting more skilled nursing facilities or long-term care facilities/nursing homes back into the local communities. Shelter providers are currently caring for some of the most complex and vulnerable people in the state because of a lack of these vital clinical or supportive housing resources. Shelters are not clinical facilities. We are not rehab facilities. We are not in-patient psychiatric facilities.

**Fund a diversity of supports and services:** The people that we work with in the hotels and in our shelters utilize a diversity of support systems. Some may work well with one provider, while others work much better with another provider.

Some may do best with a team approach, utilizing support from multiple providers. There has to be choice in their service support or we will not be meeting the individualized needs and plans. And while specific, I would like to name that End Homelessness Vermont, in their Office Of Housing Advocate fulfills an ombudsman role and they should be funded for that role. It is a critical service that many providers rely on, but is currently unfunded. Their independence allows them to advocate for clients thoroughly. This is a necessary and previously missing part of the homelessness support system.

A well rounded system that is designed for the crisis that we are experiencing right now has to have all the pieces in place to make it effective.

In short, people need options as unique as they are. They must not be housed in congregate settings for long periods of time.

If large numbers of individuals get unsheltered in the future, it absolutely will destabilize the shelter provider network around the state. It is deeply unsustainable and unethical.

Our overriding recommendation for the State's response to the homelessness crisis, whether we provide 200 more shelter beds or 1000, is to take the time and make the long-term investment in providing a strategic range of emergency shelter options and a better integration of services than what exists.

Our own top priorities for shelter options needed in Washington County and perhaps in other parts of the state are (1) low and very low barrier shelter options to house a growing unsheltered population and (2) emergency shelter for persons who need support around their (often complex) needs beyond what

traditional shelter can provide and (3) additional family sheltering options and domestic violence sheltering options.

These challenges are significant but they can be addressed with a holistic strategy and commitment. It will take a long-game approach - one that spans budget cycles. One that incorporates adequate and ongoing funding levels to enable strategic shelter expansion and organizational administrative capacity to weather that expansion safely and sustainably. We look forward to working with the State of Vermont and our community partners toward that goal.