

Senate Health and Welfare Committee

Testimony: H.91

Wednesday, April 16, 2025

For the record, my name is Sarah Russell and I am the Special Assistant to End Homelessness and serve as one of the two co-Chairs of the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance (CCHA). CCHA serves as one of the two HUD-recognized Continuum of Care for the state of Vermont. Annually, we respond to a federal HUD-CoC program NOFO by issuing an RFP to providers, ranking priority projects, and submitting a collaborative application, on behalf of the CoC. This process of regional funding application and allocation is the method by which all HUD-recognized CoCs are required to function.

Over the last few years, we have honed this process and strengthened our procedures, bringing \$1.2million to support no-barrier rental assistance for permanent supportive housing projects, serving chronically homeless households, rapid re-housing assistance for households fleeing domestic violence, and funding to support our local Coordinated Entry system and database management.

I share this with you today because, operating under regional funding programs is not new to CoC work and has been in place for many, many years to bring federal funding to out local communities. This also seems consistent with the intent behind House bill 91. This will not be implemented without challenge, but under H.91, State funding can go to communities to align with local needs and priorities. We have proved this method of regional funding can be very successful, as demonstrated by the CoC ranking process and collaborative application process I have outlined here. Let's build off how CoCs are defining local priorities and aligning funding to have the greatest impact, and develop a process to mirror the distribution of State funds to those of federal funds. CCHA stands ready to work in strong collaboration with our CAP agency partners. I am excited to work alongside our CAPs during the planning year to develop a cohesive, transparent, and fair system.

Because providers within the CCHA hold a diverse set of opinions, I want to touch on several areas of hopeful growth as H.91 moves through your committee discussions.

It is critical that sustainable funding be provided sustainable administrative funding for our CAP agencies to conduct a thorough and thoughtful annual community needs assessment. CAP agencies will be in the role of providing ongoing oversight and monitoring of local funding awards, in addition to providing support and leadership within the regional structure. For far too long, we have neglected to invest in capacity-building and backbone leadership- for this proposal to be successful, we must ensure adequate thought and investment is established at not only the forefront, but sustainably over time.

I would also stress the importance of equitable regional allocation. CVOEO served 23,000 people in their catchment area last CY- which represents 50% of Vermonters served by all CAP agencies. Our Chittenden homeless numbers alone represent well over a third of the total statewide homeless population. Our unsheltered numbers reach as high as 400 people in the warmer months and remain stable at 250 in the winter months- these numbers far exceed reports from other communities and it is imperative to ensure we have equitable funding to be able to have an effective and adequate homeless response system, based on data. Further, the ability to enact adjustments in allocations will be crucial as population fluctuates region-by-region.

One of the loudest reservations community partners have voiced regarding H.91 (which the City of Burlington shares) is more philosophical in nature – and no less important. We must work together to identify how to ensure the Governor and AHS leadership will continue to hold homelessness as a statewide problem to solve. Our communities cannot feel abandoned and isolated in this work. The

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homelessness crisis requires attention and support from our state leaders. I would like to challenge us to identify ways to continue to engage the Governor and AHS in this work – even if the administration of funding shifts to regional organizations, the State should continue to provide training of best practices, monitoring activities, technical assistance, and ongoing monitoring of impact and funding.

Finally, I wish to raise important questions about the General Assistance Emergency Housing Program for FY26. While I understand the proposed timeline for H.91 proposes changes for FY27 – it speaks nothing to FY26. Over the last few years, you have heard from dozens of service providers begging for stability within the Emergency Housing Program- they speak on behalf of their clients who are forced to live with uncertainty and the crushing anxiety of a program that has changed more times than any of us can count at this point.

I would encourage you to closely consider how the 80-day cap will place us all right back in the same state of chaos and groundhog-day-crisis this coming fall, should nothing change. One of the main premises of H.91 seems to be focusing on a more stable, human-centered system; able to exercise proactivity, be nimble enough to pivot. To lean into this innovative method, providers cannot continue to respond to seasonal crisis. Personally, my policy and systems-level work comes to a halt to hand out tents to families moving into a City-owned campground, to open shelters when it's dangerously cold, to create last minute MOUs, contracts, and purchase orders for non-profits to obtain basic needs for another mass inflow of people into unsheltered homelessness. Now is a time for intention planning and deep collaboration, therefore I am imploring you to ensure that there is at least some level of stability for vulnerable households within the Emergency Housing Program by revisiting the 80-day cap, so that we can commit fully to endeavor on this important work together.