

H.91 – An act relating to the Vermont Homeless Emergency Assistance and Responsive Transition to Housing Program VHEARTH

This bill would shift the administration and operation of Vermont’s emergency shelter programs to Vermont’s five Community Action Agencies & the Vermont Network, beginning in July of 2026. It would appropriate funding for the transition phase to both of these organizations, as well as to the Department for Children and Families. It also creates an Advisory Committee for planning purposes. It acknowledges the intent to fund these programs in the future at the levels appropriated for the current programs in FY2025.

The bill as passed by the House Human Services Committee can be found here:

[https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2026/Workgroups/House%20Human%20Services/Bills/H.91/Drafts,%20Amendments,%20and%20Legal%20Documents/H.91-Katie%20McLinn-House%20Committee%20on%20Human%20Services%20Committee%20Report%20\(8-2-1\)-3-20-2025.pdf](https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2026/Workgroups/House%20Human%20Services/Bills/H.91/Drafts,%20Amendments,%20and%20Legal%20Documents/H.91-Katie%20McLinn-House%20Committee%20on%20Human%20Services%20Committee%20Report%20(8-2-1)-3-20-2025.pdf)

Findings: The bill contains a findings section that highlights data about Vermont’s rates of homelessness and the burden people in Vermont face when paying for housing.

Legislative Intent: The bill has a section to clarify the intent of the legislators. This section states: *It is the intent of the General Assembly that unsheltered homelessness be eliminated and that homelessness in Vermont be rare, brief, and nonrecurring.*

It then clarifies the intent of the new *Vermont Homeless Emergency Assistance and Responsive Transition to Housing (VHEARTH)* Program. This section is basically a goals list for the new program, and includes the following:

1. *homelessness be reduced in Vermont and interim shelter opportunities be available to provide a stable pathway to permanent housing for all Vermonters experiencing homelessness, including safe shelter options for individuals living in unsheltered homelessness;*
2. *Vermont increase the supply of emergency shelter as well as permanent supportive housing that meets the specific needs of individuals;*
3. *community components of all shelter types are integrated in a systemic manner;*
4. *time limits, night-by-night shelter, relocation between interim shelter sites, and other disruptions in housing stability be eliminated to the extent possible;*
5. *Vermont’s emergency housing statutes, rules, policies, procedures, and practices be modeled on Housing First principles; and*
6. *Non-congregate shelter be used to the extent possible.*

Establishment of VHEARTH. The VHEARTH Program would be operated by the Community Action Agencies (CAAs) and the Vermont Network.

- The Vermont Network will be responsible for serving people experiencing or at risk of homelessness and who are experiencing or have experienced domestic and/or sexual violence.
- The CAAs will be responsible for serving all other people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.
 - The bill defines “At-risk of homelessness” as meaning *in peril of imminently losing a primary, night-time residence or precariously housed.*
- The Network and the CAAs can either operate programs and shelters themselves or have agreements with community partners to operate or run programs and shelters, or both.
- The CAAs will be required to collaborate with municipalities, the Continuums of Care and the Housing Coalitions that already exist in Vermont, as well as with other community partners.
- The expectation is that anyone who is at risk of or is experiencing unsheltered homelessness will have access to services and supports, as well as shelter, to the extent it is possible (with the funding available).
 - Shelters will include Extreme Weather Event Shelters and Emergency Shelters, which could include a range of shelter options, depending on the region and what is available at the time services are needed.
 - The goal will always be to provide shelter that is appropriate for a household as quickly as possible.

Supportive Services. The intent of the bill is for all people who are at risk of or who are experiencing unsheltered homelessness to be offered supportive services. However, the bill does not create an entitlement – it does specify that services, supports and shelter will be provided to the extent possible. The bill has a list of services that must be available:

1. *intake assessments and services for diversion from homelessness;*
2. *household needs assessments;*
3. *individualized household plans to address identified needs;*
4. *assistance obtaining and retaining housing, including financial assistance;*
5. *referrals to other services and supports;*
6. *peer-supported services;*
7. *landlord-tenant outreach, education, and conflict resolution;*
8. *housing navigation services;*
9. *advocacy; and*
10. *progress monitoring and interventions.*

Extreme Weather Event Shelters The bill would shift the responsibility for allocating funding and/or operating Extreme Weather Event Shelters (EWES) to the five Community Action Agencies. The CAAs will be required to allocate funding based on available data and considering geographic access. The bill does allow for time-limited congregate shelters to be used for EWES.

Emergency Shelters The bill allows for the CAAs, through a regional planning process, to determine the best way to provide shelter for those who need it. It collapses the current two-tier system of hotel/motel and community based shelters into one category of Emergency Shelters – the goal is for people to be provided the best possible shelter for their needs as soon as possible.

- The bill would require the CAAs to build on the Continuum of Care planning process.
- The bill requires CAAs to either provide or provide through agreements, temporary shelters which may include community based shelters, temporary use of hotels or motels, lease agreements for full or partial use of an existing building, need-specific shelter arrangements, or other arrangements.
- Further, the CAAs must provide or provide through agreements transitional shelters through community-based shelter, master grant leases, developing shelter capacity, or other arrangements.
- Also, the Network would operate a shelter system for people who have experienced or are experiencing domestic and/or sexual violence and are at risk of or are experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

Use of Hotel/Motel Rooms The bill would require any hotel/motel rooms used to comply with the Department of Health, Licensed Lodging Establishment Rule (CVR 13-140-023); and the Department of Public Safety, Vermont Fire and Building Safety Code (CVR 28-070-001).

- Each year, DCF will negotiate state rates with hotels/motels and the CAAs or community partners may not use state money to pay more than that rate on a hotel room. However, they may use additional funding to pay over the agreed upon rate if necessary to shelter a household.
- The bill would require CAAs to secure blocks of rooms whenever possible in a hotel/motel and negotiate the conditions of use for those blocks, including access for providers of case management or other supportive services.
 - The CAAs would be required to prioritize shelter in these blocks of rooms, unless it would not be suitable for a household because of their specific needs.

Duties of Community Action Agencies (and an update of the CAA Statute) The bill sets forth specific requirements for the CAAs to operate the VHEARTH Program. These requirements include having specific organizational infrastructure, having the ability to meet reporting requirements, and providing plain language communications to households who are receiving services.

The CAAs are also required to have community connections with other providers in the region, including local housing coalitions, housing providers, providers of coordinated entry, and providers of services to individuals who are older Vermonters, individuals who have disabilities, substance use disorder, or a mental health condition; individuals reentering the community after incarceration; individuals transitioning from the care and custody of the Commissioner for Children and Families; and families with children.

The bill also updates the enabling statute of the Community Action Agencies, primarily to modernize outdated language to more respectful language. It also broadens their services to include helping people in low income households to have access to safe, secure, permanent housing. The bill also changes the CAA statute to allow each CAA to set term limits for its board members in its own bylaws, rather than having term limits imposed on them through the statute.

The CAAs have been required to complete a needs assessment every three years and a specific plan every year that is related to that needs assessment. The bill would add the specific requirement to include planning with community partners to operate VHEARTH into the CAAs' planning process.

Duties of the Department for Children and Families (DCF) The bill would establish that the Agency of Human Services, working with the Department, shall have statewide responsibility for meeting the intent of the VHEARTH Program, including statewide planning, system development, and the involvement of all the Agency's departments. DCF will be responsible for providing administrative oversight and monitoring of the VHEARTH Program – essentially oversight of the CAAs as they operate the program. In addition, DCF would be required to:

- Provide guidance for operating EWES
- Maintain a website with all EWES locations
- Work with the CAAs and the Network to determine allocations of funding for the Network and for each of the five CAAs to operate VHEARTH. For the CAAs, DCF must take into account available data, the presence of community-based providers, and customary resource allocation methods, economic indicators, rate of homelessness, rental vacancy rates, and other variables, as appropriate
 - DCF must also work with the CAAs to develop a methodology for re-allocation if necessary (e.g., moving funds from one region to another if a specific situation requires that)
- Develop accountability methodology for both the CAAs and the Network, with their respective input
- Provide support and technical assistance to the CAAs, the Network, and other community partners who are providing services, supports or shelter through VHEARTH
- Identify specific funding and resources that could be used for the operation of VHEARTH
- Develop standards for the operation of community based shelters
- Adopt rules as needed for VHEARTH (note, current rules would not be in force, as current programs in statute – such as GA Emergency Housing – would not exist after July 1, 2026)

Regional Planning & Needs Assessments The bill would require the CAAs to work with the Continuums of Care and with other community and state partners to develop a regional needs assessment and planning process for use in each community action agency's region to inform future plans addressing housing and homelessness in each region of the State. At a minimum, the plans would be required to:

1. address progress in reducing the number of households experiencing homelessness in a region;
2. assess the rate households placed in permanent housing return to homelessness and the underlying reasons;
3. identify resources developed and utilized in the region to address homelessness;
4. report the rate of household participation with coordinated entry processes and case management services;
5. identify system gaps and the funding needed to address those gaps, including periodic inflationary adjustments; and
6. utilize data, including Vermont's Point-in-Time Count, coordinated entry assessment results, and community conversations.

The CAAs will be required to submit plans to DCF every three years – updated annually – and DCF will aggregate the plans and submit them to the House Human Services Committee and Senate Health & Welfare Committee.

VHEARTH Advisory Committee The bill would establish an advisory committee, which would be in effect until July 1, 2029. The Advisory Committee would be expected to provide advice and recommendations to the Commissioner for Children and Families and to the community action agencies regarding the design, implementation, and transition to the VHEARTH Program. The members appointed are expected to reflect the growing diversity among Vermonters, including individuals who are Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color, as well as with regard to socioeconomic status, geographic location, gender, sexual identity, and disability status. The bill includes a specific membership list for the Advisory Committee (19 total members):

- five representatives with lived experience of homelessness, appointed by the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance and the Balance of State Continuum of Care;
- five representatives, one appointed by each of the community action agencies;
- one representative, appointed by the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance;
- one representative, appointed by the Balance of State Continuum of Care;
- five representatives of local housing coalitions, including at least two of whom are shelter providers, appointed jointly by the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance and the Balance of State Continuum of Care;
- the Deputy Commissioner of the Department for Children and Families' Economic Services Division or designee; and
- the Director of the Department for Children and Families' Office of Economic Opportunity or designee.

The Advisory Committee can form subcommittees and invite others to be a part of the subcommittees. The official members listed above will be eligible for per diems and expense reimbursement for Advisory Committee meetings, but any people on subcommittees would not be eligible for compensation or reimbursement. The Advisory Committee itself can have up to 12 meetings. The subcommittees are not limited in how many meetings they can have, or how many subcommittees there can be.

Implementation Plan DCF is required to submit an Implementation Plan to the House Human Services and Senate Health & Welfare Committees by February 1, 2026. DCF is expected to collaborate with the Agency of Human Services, the CAAs and the Advisory Committee. The plan should ensure maximum flexibility for the use of resources and streamline processes for VHEARTH Program participants.

Specifically, the implementation plan shall address:

1. *funding allocations among the community action agencies and other providers, including for services specific to households that are experiencing or that have experienced domestic or sexual violence;*
2. *additional State and federal funding and other resources identified for the Program;*
3. *appropriate measures and methods of accountability in fulfilling the intent of this act for community action agencies, the organization serving households that are experiencing or that have experienced domestic and sexual violence, and community partners;*
4. *appropriate supportive services specific to the level of shelter a household utilizes, or whether the household is at risk of homelessness, or experiencing unsheltered homelessness;*
5. *establishing an appeals process that includes a hearing before the Human Services Board and an option for an expedited appeals process;*
6. *expanded use of 211 within the intake system;*
7. *whether continuation in emergency shelter should include an expectation regarding household participation in case management services or other expectations such as night limits on the use of hotels and motels, and if so, what elements and in what circumstances participation in case management services or other expectations should be applied;*
8. *whether the use of emergency shelter should include financial participation, and if so, what that participation should include;*
9. *how prioritization should occur for emergency temporary shelter and what priority categories should exist within those parameters;*
10. *how to best ensure that there is equitable access to shelter and supportive services for households experiencing homelessness;*
11. *appropriate level of required intake and assessment processes for each of the various levels of shelter that a household may utilize for households that are at risk of homelessness and for households experiencing unsheltered homelessness; and*
12. *any anticipated challenges requiring a legislative solution.*

Transitional & Future Appropriations The bill would appropriate \$10 million in Fiscal Year 2025 for the transition to the VHEARTH Program for the CAAs, the Vermont Network and DCF in the following way:

- \$6,500,000 to the five Community Action Agencies and the Vermont Network (it does not specify how that total will be divided)
- \$500,000.00 to the Department for Children and Families for contractual and other system transformation assistance
- \$3,000,000.00 to the Department for Children and Families for the continued development of shelter capacity in the State

The bill also states: *It is the intent of the General Assembly that in fiscal year 2027 and thereafter, equivalent funds and resources, base and one-time, used in fiscal year 2025 for General Assistance emergency housing and the Housing Opportunity Grant Program be redesignated for the Vermont Homeless Emergency Assistance and Responsive Transition to Housing Program.*