



**VERMONT
COMMUNITY ACTION
PARTNERSHIP**

- ❖ Vicki Loomis, BROC Community Action (BROC)
- ❖ Alison Calderara, Capstone Community Action
- ❖ Paul Dragon Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity (CVOEO)
- ❖ Jenna O'Farrell, Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA)
- ❖ Joshua Davis, Southeastern Vermont Community Action (SEVCA)

Testimony to the Senate Health & Welfare Committee

H.938 – Homelessness Response Continuum

Paul Dragon, Executive Director, CVOEO

Representing the Vermont Community Action Partnership (VCAP)

Good morning, Chair Lyons and members of the Senate Health & Welfare Committee. My name is Paul Dragon, and I am the Executive Director of the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity, or CVOEO, representing the Vermont Community Action Partnership, VCAP. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding our work at VCAP and on H.938 and Vermont's homelessness response system.

Across VCAP and within CVOEO, we are committed to the shared goal of helping people move from homelessness into permanent housing. We support the bill's intent to create a more coordinated and responsive homelessness system. At the same time, successful implementation will require statutory expectations to be aligned with real housing capacity, rental assistance, sufficient emergency shelters beds and service infrastructure.

The scale of need has changed dramatically over the past decade. For several years now, Vermont has ranked among the highest states in the nation for per-capita homelessness. The 2026 Point in Time count (released this week) demonstrates that our rates continue to increase with Chittenden County now holding a disproportionate 40% of the state's unsheltered population. Homelessness and human suffering are visible in every community, and all providers are operating under unsustainable pressure.

Community Action Agencies are uniquely positioned to respond. We offer integrated, "no wrong door" systems that address homelessness as an interconnected crisis. When someone comes to us for shelter, they may also receive food assistance, heating help, transportation support, benefits navigation, financial coaching, fair housing, tenant rights classes, employment support, childcare resources, or domestic and sexual violence services. That coordinated approach reduces barriers and helps people stabilize more quickly.

This year, Vermont's Community Action network of five Community Action Agencies across the state expects to serve approximately 43,000 low-income Vermonters seeking urgent assistance.

CVOEO's emergency shelter system is one example of how a Community Action Agency coordinated response infrastructure already operates on the ground. Our shelter network includes nine shelters across the region—from low-barrier shelters to family shelters, domestic violence shelters, and our newer recovery shelter. This network is supported by the Community Resource Center in Burlington, which serves as the central hub for intake, coordination, navigation, and connection to housing and services in Burlington and across the region. That hub-and-network model allows people to enter the system through a single point of access while connecting them to the shelter and support environment most appropriate for their needs and goals.

We appreciate H.938's emphasis on coordination and housing outcomes. However, there are several implementation considerations that we urge the Committee to address.

First, implementation must be sequenced to actual capacity. Emergency shelter capacity and emergency motel capacity must remain available until sufficient shelter beds, staffing, service infrastructure, and housing options are operational and verified regionally before any reduction in hotel or motel placements occurs. Otherwise, households may be pushed directly into unsheltered homelessness greatly increasing the personal crisis and community impact.

Second, Vermont must preserve low-barrier, safety-first access. Participation requirements, diversion screening, or rigid time limits can unintentionally create front-door barriers for households in immediate crisis, especially individuals with high-acuity behavioral health or medical needs. Average time limits at some of our shelters are well over six months. Are we to discharge people back into homelessness for lack of housing?



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Third, the state must invest in the exit ramp: permanent supportive housing, rental assistance, and long-term stabilization supports. Housing First works best when housing stability comes first, with voluntary wraparound services supporting long-term success.

The local data in Chittenden County illustrates these pressures clearly. Coordinated Entry data shows that the average time from system entry to permanent housing now ranges from roughly 280 to 340 days, primarily because affordable housing units, subsidies, and supportive services are insufficient. We have also seen a steep decline in successful housing placements following recent reductions in federal housing vouchers earlier this year.

At the same time, providers are serving individuals with increasingly complex needs. Many households require longer-term stabilization support, including landlord engagement, behavioral health coordination, and ongoing case management to sustain housing and prevent returns to homelessness. Forcing vulnerable people to live without shelter only deepens their needs and makes it much more difficult to stabilize. It is inhumane to cycle people in and out of stability because of the flaws of our system.

To respond to these realities, VCAP has submitted statewide budget requests to strengthen Community Action capacity across Vermont, including investments in anti-poverty services, benefits navigators, and homeless services.

Ultimately, our request to this Committee is straightforward: please support policies and investments that make homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring. Please support our communities. That means funding prevention, rapid re-housing, shelter capacity paired with services, and permanent supportive housing at the scale communities are actually experiencing.

If our system works only for the easiest cases, it will fail Vermonters with the highest barriers and the greatest needs.

For more than 60 years, Community Action has partnered with Vermont communities to help people meet immediate needs while building long-term stability. We remain committed to doing our part in this crisis, and we ask the State to match the scale of the need with the scale of the response.

Thank you for your time, your leadership, and the opportunity to testify. I'm happy to answer any questions.