

4/3/2026

Good morning, Chair Lyons and members of the Committee. My name is Jenna O'Farrell, and I'm here on behalf of the Vermont Community Action Agencies to ask you to invest in proven, cost-effective tools that prevent homelessness, stabilize households, and strengthen our communities.

First request: \$1,250,000 for statewide Concrete Supports. This funding is not included in the House budget. Distributed across the five Community Action Agencies, these flexible, client-directed dollars meet acute needs—paying emergency rent or utilities, clothing and hygiene supplies, replacement IDs, transportation, and other small but essential items. All five agencies already use federal funds and local fundraising for concrete supports, but demand outstrips resources. These modest investments routinely stop a household's slide into crisis and can help people who are currently unhoused get the basic items they need to connect with services and regain stability. Preventing eviction and homelessness with small, timely payments is far less costly than emergency shelter, hospitalizations, or court proceedings. Please fund \$1,250,000 so agencies can respond quickly and equitably across the state.

Second request: \$1,500,000 for Case Management and Housing Navigation to support three full-time equivalent staff at each Community Action Agency. Case management is a client-centered, holistic approach: assess needs, create individualized plans, advocate, and coordinate services so people can secure and sustain housing. Housing Navigators work directly on long-term housing goals, removing barriers, securing placements, and intervening when housing is at risk. H.938 includes some case management funding, but distribution, eligibility, and sufficiency are unclear. A dedicated statewide increase of 3 FTEs per agency ensures consistent, locally grounded capacity to implement H.938's mandates and to meet the day-to-day needs of our communities. Investing in these positions reduces recidivism into homelessness and connects people to benefits, healthcare, employment supports, and stabilization services.

Third request: \$200,000 to restore the Fair Housing Program through DHCD. This work was previously supported by a federal grant that can no longer be performed under new terms acceptable to Community Action Agencies. State funding would maintain critical fair housing capacity: reduce homelessness and evictions, investigate and resolve discrimination complaints, educate landlords and tenants, correct systemic barriers, and expand access to the existing housing inventory. This is prevention and protection that supports long-term housing stability.

In closing: these investments—\$1,250,000 for Concrete Supports, \$1,500,000 for Case Management and Housing Navigation, and \$200,000 for Fair Housing—are targeted, evidence-based, and leverage existing local infrastructure. They prevent crisis, reduce public costs, and help Vermonters remain housed and productive. I urge you to include these amounts in the final budget. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Jenna O'Farrell, Executive Director

Northeast Kingdom Community Action