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**Report to  
The Vermont Legislature**

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**GENERAL ASSISTANCE EMERGENCY HOUSING REPORT  
In Accordance with 33 V.S.A. 2115**

**Submitted to:** House Committee on Appropriations  
House Committee on General and Housing  
House Human Services  
Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Senate Committee on Health and Welfare

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**AGENCY OF HUMAN SERVICES  
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## Introduction

The General and Emergency Assistance program serves the most vulnerable Vermonters, providing assistance with rent and mortgage payments, medical and dental needs, emergency and transitional housing benefits, assistance with transportation, and a small cash benefit.

The General Assistance Emergency Housing program is administered by the Economic Services Division (ESD) within the Department for Children and Families (DCF). The program is intended to provide short-term shelter for Vermonters experiencing unhoused homelessness when shelters are full or unavailable. It is administered as an economic benefit in which ESD pays a hotel for a room on a night-by-night basis. It does not include other supports, such as case management, because the duration is limited to 28 or 84 days. The goal is to connect the households to coordinated entry and other community-based services to provide on-going assistance.

In order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 many congregate shelters were closed at the beginning of the pandemic because it was unknown how the virus spread, vaccines were not yet available, and treatments were not widespread. Further, those who were experiencing unsheltered homelessness needed a location to shelter when Vermonters were ordered to stay home.

A program that was intended to house individuals for days was extended to house individuals for months to years.

The population expanded during that time from an annual average of 250 households to more than 1800 households served in 2022.

Unlike the traditional shelters, that this motel program was temporarily replacing, the GA Emergency Housing program did not have embedded services to assist people in finding housing or addressing their health and human services needs. As a result, some of the most vulnerable Vermonters' needs went unaddressed.

The General Assistance Emergency Housing program has undergone many changes since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, but it is important to note that the structure and level of staffing for the program remains the same.

## Programs and Rules in Place in Fiscal Year 2023

Fiscal Year 2023 saw many changes to the General Assistance program. The Transitional Housing Program began in July 2022 and ended in March 2023 (this was a brand-new program), while the traditional Emergency Housing program ran concurrently. In November of 2022, Adverse Weather Conditions were declared for the General Assistance program, and the relaxed rules associated with the Adverse Weather program were extended to end June 1, 2023. Although Adverse Weather Conditions is not a new program, typically it ends by March 15<sup>th</sup> each year. The 2022 expansion allowed 800 households three additional months of housing. The Budget Adjustment Act and Executive Order No. 02-23 expanded eligibility for the Emergency Housing program, and as the fiscal year closed, DCF implemented Act 81, which was passed in late June 2023.

## Transitional Housing Program

On July 1, 2022, DCF began administering the Transitional Housing Program, funded with federal Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) funding. The Transitional Housing Program provided monthly payments (rent) to hotels on behalf of eligible households. These payments were based on monthly contracts between the household and hotels known as "Occupancy Agreements." Occupancy agreements were synonymous to a lease agreement between a tenant and landlord. The state was not a

party to these agreements. The Transitional Housing Program also paid a security deposit on behalf of each client household equal to \$3,300-, or one-month's hotel payment. Households that maintained housing for four or more months were eligible to have the security deposit returned to them at the end of the program. Security deposits for households that were housed for less than four months were returned to DCF.

Due to funding constraints, the Transitional Housing Program stopped accepting new applications in October 2022. Based on the original available funding, the Transitional Housing Program was originally intended to run for 2-3 years, however, due to ERAP funds being exhausted more quickly than anticipated, the program ended on March 31, 2023.

### Adverse Weather Conditions

The Cold Weather Exception in 2012 and then the Adverse Weather Conditions policy in 2017 were designed to relax traditional eligibility criteria for the General Assistance program. On November 15, 2022, the Adverse Weather Conditions policy was enacted for the winter of 2022/2023. The Adverse Weather Conditions policy relaxes eligibility criteria for Emergency Housing, enabling Vermonters who would otherwise be ineligible for the traditional General Assistance program to be housed during cold winter months. The program is intended as a life safety measure, to prevent people from being significantly harmed or dying from exposure to the cold.

The Adverse Weather Conditions policy is traditionally enacted on a night-to-night basis based on weather conditions. Beginning on December 15, 2022, the Adverse Weather Conditions policy transitioned to a date-to-date model allowing households to be eligible for continuous housing through March 15, 2023. The end date of the date-to-date model of Adverse Weather Conditions was extended through the Budget Adjustment act to end on June 1, 2023.

### Budget Adjustment Act

The Budget Adjustment Act provided additional funding to extend the Adverse Weather Conditions Policy to June 1, 2023, and expanded categorical eligibility through June 30, 2023. Categorical eligibility under the Budget Adjustment Act was defined as follows (criteria that were new under the BBA are in bold):

- **A household that has a member who is 60 years of age or older;**
- A household that has a member who receives SSI or SSDI;
- **A household with a child or children who are either under 18 years of age or who are 18 or 19 years of age and attending secondary school on a full-time basis or an equivalent level of vocational or technical training;**
- **A household that has a member who is pregnant;**
- A household that has a member who has experienced a dangerous or life-threatening incident related to violence against the member that either occurred within the member's home or caused the member to reasonably believe that the member was at risk of further harm if the member remained in the home;
- A household that has a member who has experienced domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or human trafficking;
- A household that lost its housing due to a natural disaster, such as a flood, fire or hurricane;
- A household that is pursuing legal resolution of violations of the Rental Housing Health Code through the Department of Health or appropriate local officials; or

- A household that has been physically barred from entering their residence through an intentional act of the landlord.

### **Executive Order No. 02-23**

On May 26, 2023, Governor Scott signed Executive Order No. 02-23. Based on the Budget Adjustment Act of 2023, the overall availability of funding and the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the executive order instructed DCF to restore the General Assistance Emergency Housing program to its pre-pandemic rules effective July 1, 2023. Additionally, the order expanded the definition of families to include children between the ages of 7 and 18, or 19 years of age if the child is still in school. The executive order also reset the clock on the number of nights households had used to 0, allowing all eligible households to have either 28 or 84 nights of housing starting on July 1, 2023, regardless of their engagement with the program over the previous 12 months.

### **Act 81**

Act 81 became law on June 29, 2023. Act 81 provides an extended housing benefit for all households categorically eligible under a Budget Adjustment Act category and housed as of the night of June 30, 2023. This extended housing benefit ends on April 1, 2024. Act 81 directs the Agency of Human Services to locate an alternative housing placement for all households housed in hotels no later than April 1, 2024.

Act 81 requires households to participate in coordinated entry and case management, attempt to locate their own alternative housing, and contribute 30 percent of their income towards their own housing. Households will no longer be eligible for this extended housing benefit if they fail to meet any of the engagement requirements outlined in Act 81, decline the offer of an appropriate housing placement, or are asked to leave a hotel or motel due to misconduct.

### **Care Coordination Housing Resource Teams (CCHRT)**

In the fall of 2022, the Agency of Human Services launched Care Coordination Housing Review Teams to provide additional support to individuals and families housed through the General Assistance Emergency Housing program. The teams consisted of an Economic Services Division benefit specialist, a HireAbility counselor (formerly VocRehab), a Vermont Chronic Care Initiative nurse, and a community partner housing specialist. The goal of the teams was to identify barriers related to securing housing.

The state-staffed teams ended in June 2023, transitioning to contractors in July 2023. The teams validated and reinforced that going to where people are - and doing so consistently - increases engagement. Working together in interdisciplinary teams is supportive, educational, and efficient, allowing the service providers to address underlying and unmet needs.

These teams, originally made up of AHS staff with other responsibilities and job duties, were a critical first step in acknowledging that this shelter benefit was being accessed more as housing, and less as temporary emergency shelter – with households remaining in the program for years, instead of days. The temporary teams funded in Act 81 end in April 2024. Additional funding and staffing would be needed to maintain this service.

## Program Challenges

The General Assistance program experienced many challenges throughout Fiscal Year 2023 including: the lack of affordable housing units; addressing substandard conditions in some motels in partnership with the Vermont Department of Health Food and Lodging Program; difficulty for households in recouping Transitional Housing Program security deposits; supporting program participants with overcoming barriers to become eligible for permanent housing; implementing a variety of rules and procedures in 2023; staffing challenges; increased wait times on phone lines; and threats made to DCF staff.

### **Lack of Affordable Housing Units**

The lack of affordable, available units remains the number one barrier to housing individuals in the hotel/motel program. Clients with services and vouchers are still unable to find the units they need, and without a change in availability of this type of housing, the pressure on the hotel/motel program will continue.

### **Substandard Conditions in Hotels**

DCF works extensively with the Food and Lodging Program to monitor conditions in hotels and correct problems as they arise. Some examples of unsatisfactory conditions include a bedbug infestation, plumbing problems resulting in raw sewage being discharged into rooms, and violations of licensing conditions. When conditions such as the beforementioned are identified, DCF coordinates with community partners to both support motels and households with cleaning belongings, accessing cleaning supplies and storage as needed and when possible, DCF also works with the family to relocate as space allows.

### **Security Deposit Returns**

The Transitional Housing Program provided security deposits to hotels on behalf of clients. Households that stayed in housing for four months or more were to have the deposit returned, less any damages, to them by the hotel. All other deposits were to be returned to DCF. At the end of the program, some clients reported having difficulty obtaining the security deposit from the hotel. When clients notified DCF of these challenges, DCF reached out to the hotel on behalf of the client to request the deposit be returned or for the hotel to provide documentation on why funds were being withheld. Clients also had the opportunity to contact Vermont Legal Aid for assistance.

### **Barriers to Permanent Housing**

Between 50-62% of adults that engaged in the Complex Care Housing Resource Teams, shared that they had barriers to permanent housing that complicated their transition. These included, a lack of sufficient income, poor credit history, or bad or no landlord references. These barriers coupled with self-reports of needing additional mental health support (24-28%) and the lack of available, affordable units has made it incredibly challenging to help participants transition out of shelter to more permanent solutions. Of the June cohort, 17% of individuals remaining in hotels require assistance with activities of daily living. While the Agency of Human Services is committed to finding appropriate housing supports so that individuals can successfully live independently, finding affordable housing units remains a barrier.

## **Implementation of Legislative Changes**

In Fiscal Year 2023, DCF implemented a variety of rules and procedures in response to legislative changes. At times, DCF struggled- with the short timelines to prepare and deliver trainings for eligibility staff on changes to policy, sometimes resulting in incorrect eligibility determinations for households. Upon learning of any incorrect determinations, DCF does follow up and reinstate housing as appropriate. Act 81 was signed into law on June 29, 2023. DCF had two days to implement this new law and to determine how to define and operationalize the multiple compliance pieces, like engaging with a case manager, engaging with coordinated entry, contributing 30% of one's income towards housing, etc. into practice.

## **Staffing Challenges**

Although Act 81 allowed DCF to retain limited-service positions to assist with the work, hiring remains a challenge. The allocated positions were under recruitment in early July, and as of September 1, eleven were filled. The sheer volume of work given the cohort size (1250 households) has demanded a significant amount of DCF's focus. In comparison, in 2019, the caseload for the Emergency Housing program was 250 households served across all of ESD as an embedded piece of work. In the beginning of 2023, the program had 1800 participating households and 15 limited-service positions, (none of which were ever all full) and all the while the program has increased in complexity.

## **High Call Volume, Long Wait Times**

Call wait times for clients seeing General Assistance or housing support have more than tripled since June 2023 with some wait times reaching four hours. In response, DCF has moved staff attention to the General Assistance phone line, however that resulted in Vermonters who needed to renew their 3SquaresVermont and Reach Up benefits also experiencing significant wait times or not being served and having a lag in their benefit renewal. Along with using a call-back system, DCF is currently in the process of bringing on a contractor to assist with the call center, as the wait times have not resolved.

## **Staff Stressors: Aggression, Threats of Violence**

There is also a significant toll on the Economic Services Division staff that is not as easily quantified. It is almost a daily occurrence to have an angry client threatening a worker for not renewing their housing; this is both on the phone and in person and often involves the threat of a weapon or violence or having an advocacy entity threaten litigation. DCF staff find it challenging to do their best work when they fear being harmed or are being questioned in such a way that assumes they have carried out the rules incorrectly. Under extreme pressure and with a vast set of client circumstances to predict, there have been mistakes, but those mistakes, when found, have been fixed and the policies updated.

## **Conclusion**

Fiscal Year 2023 saw a multitude of changes including the implementation of the Transitional Housing Program, expanded Adverse Weather Conditions, expanded eligibility under the Budget Adjustment Act, and the enactment of Act 81. DCF navigated the many program changes and challenges throughout the year with a great deal of support across the Agency of Human Services and community partners with the goal of providing wraparound supports in a system of care that has been increasingly taxed since the beginning of the pandemic. DCF saw program utilization peak in the spring of 2023 before dropping with the end of Adverse Weather Conditions in June of 2023. Throughout the year, program participation was high, with DCF serving more than 2000 households in many months. The need for

housing assistance remained high, even as the overall number of households utilizing housing programs declined.



## Appendix A: Links

Transitional Housing rules:

<https://outside.vermont.gov/dept/DCF/Shared%20Documents/ESD/Rules/100-Transitional%20Housing.pdf>

Budget Adjustment Act:

[https://ljfo.vermont.gov/assets/Uploads/6ef8f19028/GENERAL-368024-v1-23BAA\\_CoC\\_As\\_Passed.pdf](https://ljfo.vermont.gov/assets/Uploads/6ef8f19028/GENERAL-368024-v1-23BAA_CoC_As_Passed.pdf)

Executive Order 02-23:

<https://governor.vermont.gov/sites/scott/files/documents/EO%2002-23%20-%20Housing%20Directives.pdf>

Act 81:

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2024/Docs/ACTS/ACT081/ACT081%20As%20Enacted.pdf>

Housing Data:

<https://dcf.vermont.gov/Addressing-and-Preventing-Unsheltered-Homelessness>

## Appendix B: Adverse Weather Conditions

### General Assistance Housing Adverse Weather Conditions (AWC) for the 2022-2023 Season

Commencing November 15, eligibility for temporary shelter through Vermont's General Assistance (GA) and Emergency Assistance (EA) programs will be modified so that persons who are homeless and without adequate financial resources may seek safe shelter.

- A. Eligibility for temporary housing will be relaxed beginning November 15, 2022, through May 31, 2023.
- B. Temporary housing may be authorized in increments up to 30 days.
- C. The GA income contribution requirement outlined in Rule 2652.4 do not apply to AWC.
- D. If a household applying for or granted temporary housing under AWC loses their temporary housing at a shelter, hotel or similar establishment for not following the rules of the establishment, the household will be ineligible for further temporary housing for 30 days beginning with the date of ejection from the shelter, motel, or similar establishment.

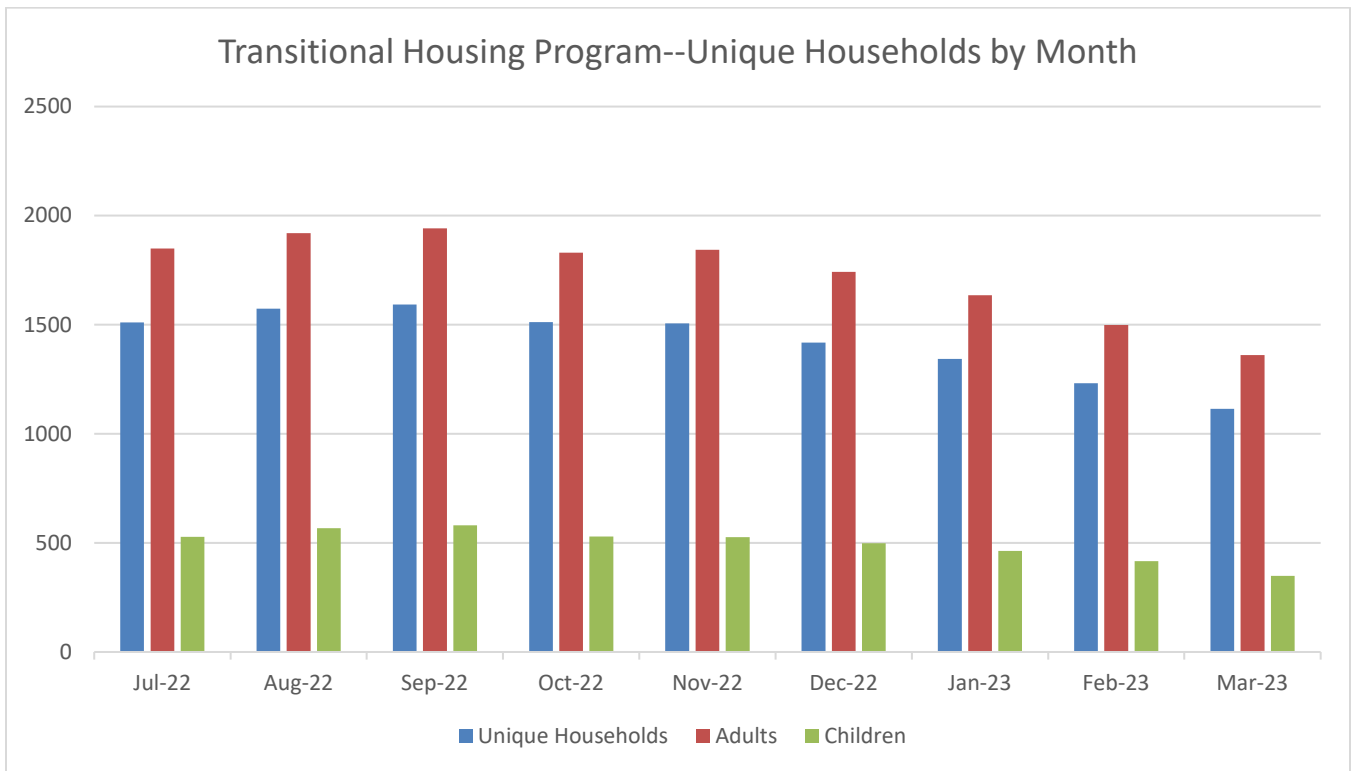
If a household applying for temporary housing under AWC refused available shelter space or did not show up at the shelter in time to accept available shelter space, the household will be ineligible for further temporary housing for a period of 30 days beginning with the date the applicant refused available shelter space or did not show up at the shelter in time to accept available shelter space.

If a household applying for temporary housing has refused available housing, the household will be deemed ineligible for a motel voucher per requirements to exhaust other housing options in Rule 2652.2

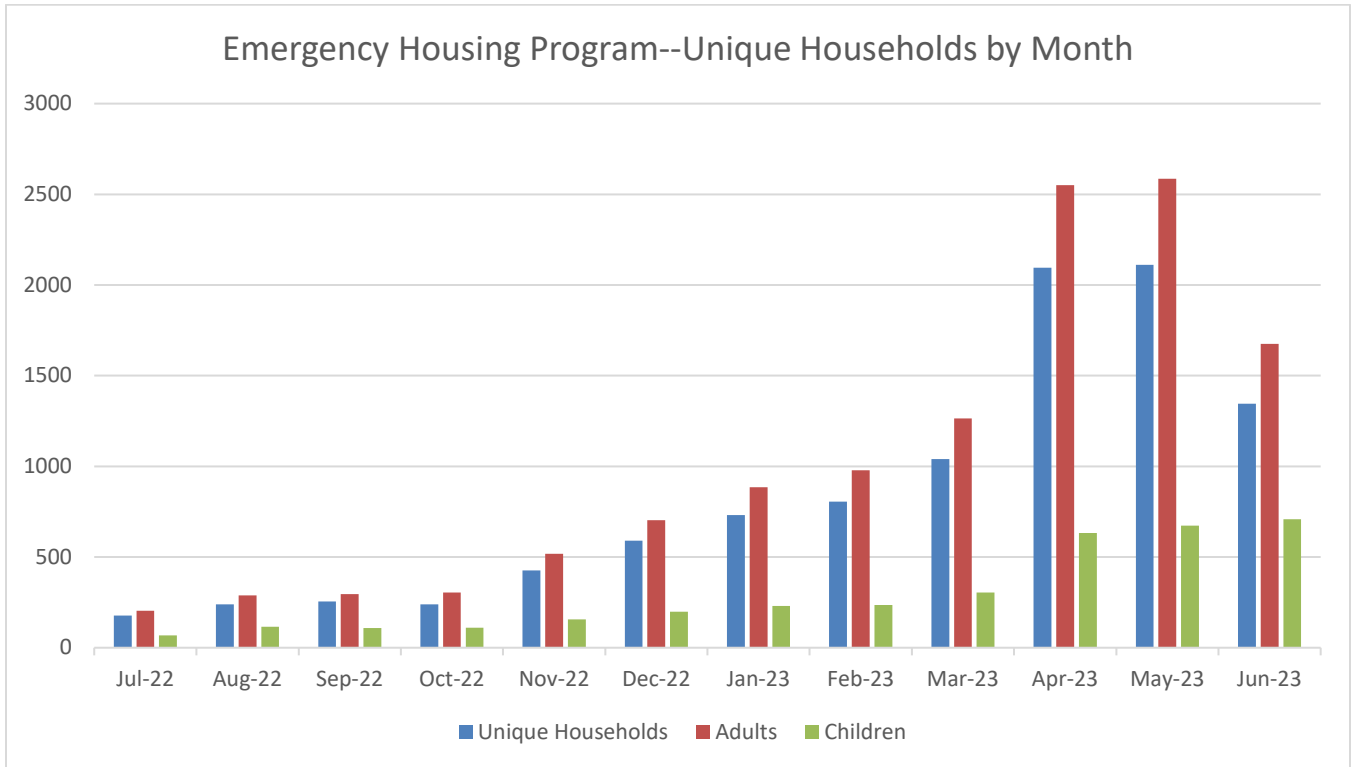
If a household does not check in at an ESD District Office or call ESD at 1-800-479-6151 the following business day after being housed by 211, the household will be ineligible for further temporary housing until they apply at an ESD District Office.

- E. Households that are exited from the DCF Transitional Housing program for failure to participate in the coordinated entry process, TH-114, will not be eligible for housing assistance for the duration of AWC.
- F. Although there is no cap on the number of nights temporary housing can be authorized under AWC, nights received under AWC will count toward the maximum number of nights that can be received under catastrophic criteria (84 nights in a 12-month period) or vulnerable populations (28 nights in a 12-month period).
- G. Consistent with ESD's participation in Coordinated Entry, District Offices should complete a Housing Crisis Referral form for each applicant requesting housing under AWC and forward those referrals to the local continuum of care's Lead Agency.

## Appendix C: Transitional Housing Program Utilization by Month



## Appendix D: Emergency Housing Utilization by Month



*\*Please note that it is possible for households to have been in both the Transitional Housing program and the Emergency Housing program in the same month. This would happen if a household was exited from an occupancy agreement and housed in the Emergency Housing program while attempting to obtain a new occupancy agreement.*