
**Report to
The Vermont Legislature**

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

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

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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 designed to provide short term housing for Vermonters experiencing homelessness. The General Assistance Emergency Housing program has undergone many changes since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

Emergency Housing Waiver and Variance of Rules

Prior to the COVID-19 public health emergency, eligibility for Emergency Housing was far more restrictive. The Emergency Housing Waiver and Variance of Rules allowed DCF to serve more Vermonters during the COVID-19 pandemic.

On June 1, 2021, DCF implemented new comprehensive GA Emergency Housing Rules. These rules were developed by a legislative required working group and remained in place through June 30, 2022.

The following is a summary of the rules implemented on June 1, 2021 for new applicants and July 1, 2021 for existing recipients:

- Households must be living in Vermont voluntarily and not for a temporary purpose
- Household must meet categorical eligibility
- A motel voucher will not be issued if shelter space is available, unless there are safety concerns
- Households cannot have left housing voluntarily
- The income threshold has been set at 185% of the Federal Poverty Limit
- There is a 30% income contribution
- The resource limit is set at \$2,250
- Clients are required to engage with housing case management
- The program is approved for a maximum of 84 days annually
- A Period of Ineligibility (POI) will be applied

On September 21, 2021, as the first households began to reach their 84-night maximum, Governor Scott ordered a 30-day “pause” before narrowing eligibility. During the “pause”, households who reached the 84-day maximum were not exited from Emergency Housing if all other eligibility criteria was met. On October 18th, the pause was extended through December 31st, 2021.

On November 4, 2021, DCF implemented the Adverse Weather Conditions policy. The policy was in effect from November 22, 2021 to March 1, 2022

On February 22, 2022, DCF extended the Adverse Weather Conditions policy to March 31, 2022.

The Budget Adjustment Act (Act 83) extended the Adverse Weather Conditions policy to June 30, 2022.

Adverse Weather Conditions (AWC)

The Department for Children and Families announced the Adverse Weather Conditions policy in November 2021 which relaxed eligibility for the GA Emergency Housing program during winter months. Individuals who meet income and resource eligibility and had not voluntarily left appropriate housing were eligible for housing regardless of categorical eligibility. Households were housed through the cold weather season even in excess of the 84-day limit.

The policy was implemented without weather conditions criteria from November 22 to March 1, allowing for enhanced predictability during the coldest months. The policy was then extended, by DCF and legislators, to June 30, 2022.

Reinstatement of Pre-COVID Temporary Housing Rules

On July 1, 2022, the period covered by Emergency Housing Waiver and Variance of rules came to an end and DCF returned to its longstanding General Assistance Temporary Housing rules (see Appendix A).

To be eligible for temporary housing, applicants must have lost housing due to a catastrophic situation or meet categorical eligibility criteria. Examples of catastrophic situations include: housefires, floods, or the death of a spouse or minor child, evictions for which the tenant is not at fault, and fleeing domestic violence. Applicants eligible due to a catastrophic situation receive up to 84 nights of housing in a 12-month period. Categorical eligibility criteria target the most vulnerable Vermonters, including recipients of Social Security benefits, those over age 65, pregnant women in their third trimester, and households including a child aged 6 or younger. Applicants who meet vulnerable population criteria receive up to 28 nights of housing in a 12-month period. DCF refers to shelter when available and appropriate. Eligible applicants are expected to work with housing case managers to find permanent housing.

Currently, the General Assistance Emergency Housing program is primarily federally funded, using the Emergency Rental Assistance Program. Historically, Emergency Housing expenditures draw from the state General Fund.

Transitional Housing

DCF administers the Transitional Housing Program (THP). The THP was created to allow Vermonters experiencing homelessness to stay in hotels longer while completing less paperwork, allowing for stays of up to 90 days at a time between applications. Under the Emergency Housing program, stays last no longer than 28 nights before applicants must reapply. By allowing households to go up to 90 days between applications, the THP provides a more stable environment for households to access services. Eligible applicant households must enroll in Coordinated Entry and participate in housing case management.

DCF is hopeful that providing enhanced stability to households while simultaneously requiring engagement will lead households to success in locating permanent housing.

To be found eligible, applicant's gross household income must be at or below 80% of Area Median Income (AMI), determined by the town in which the applicant is seeking housing. The 80% AMI

threshold allows DCF to serve many households that would normally be considered income ineligible for DCF assistance programs. Additionally, applicants must be Vermont residents and may not have received more than 18 months of Emergency Rental Assistance Program benefits.

DCF provides a security deposit of up to \$3,300 on behalf of eligible households. The security deposit is refundable to households who remain under an Occupancy Agreement for four months or longer. This money could be instrumental in helping households exit the Transitional Housing Program. Because the deposit can be refunded to households who do not damage their rooms, applicant households have monetary support when they exit, should they meet the rules of Occupancy Agreements. The security deposits also incentivize hotel participation by alleviating financial risk.

DCF offers up to 28 days of Provisional Housing to households who have not secured an Occupancy Agreement. Households must not be eligible for assistance under the GA Emergency Housing program. Households must meet the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Category 1 definition of homelessness. The period of Provisional Housing is intended to give households time to secure an Occupancy Agreement.

Some applicants for housing benefits prove difficult to house. Some households are not welcome in the hotels DCF uses to house eligible applicants. In these cases, DCF may, at its discretion, issue a “Hard to House” payment of \$3,300 on behalf of the household. This payment is non-refundable.

When GA Emergency Housing eligibility returned to pre-pandemic criteria, ESD worked directly with GA participants to assist with enrollment into THP. From April 1 to June 30, ESD staff visited hotels across the state to assist with enrollment for the new program. On July 1, 88% of GA participants transitioned into THP. After the July 1, households experiencing homelessness can still enroll in THP if they continue to meet eligibility requirements by calling the ESD Benefits Service line (1-800-479-6151, press “8”).

DCF is currently housing approximately 1,500 households under the Transitional Housing Program. Federal funding for the THP is provided through the Emergency Rental Assistance program.

Program Challenges

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, DCF has experienced capacity challenges at participating hotels. Due to limited capacity, DCF has had no choice but to house some applicants at hotels outside their home area. This impacts their ability to receive services and adversely impacts children continuing at the same school. On most nights, all available hotel rooms in the state are full. DCF has tried to address this by engaging with additional hotels, with limited success.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, DCF housed a fraction of the households currently being served. In the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, DCF housed 250 households on a busy winter night. That number has grown to over 1,500 households currently housed by the department. The large increase in households served by DCF programs has led to a marked increase in calls to emergency services. Many municipalities statewide report significantly higher volumes of calls to police and ambulance services, with some of those calls resulting from serious incidents. There have been several high-profile incidents involving hotel guests that has increased the visibility of the program and brought negative attention from many city and town officials. ESD has attempted to maintain positive relationships with municipalities through regular meetings with towns most impacted by the increased number of clients in hotels and through a contracted liaison who is in constant communication with law enforcement officers throughout the state.

DCF has received numerous complaints regarding the hotels used to house participants in the Transitional and Emergency Housing programs. Many complaints concern the condition of the rooms in which eligible applicants are housed including reports of bedbugs, inadequate plumbing, and issues of cleanliness and disrepair. DCF refers complainants to the Vermont Department of Health Food and Lodging Program and works closely with the Vermont Department of Health to maintain a safe and healthy environment for program participants. Additionally, some applicant households have reported mistreatment at the hands of hotel owners and employees. DCF makes appropriate referrals depending on the circumstances. Referrals have been made to the Human Rights Commission, Vermont Legal Aid, and Disability Rights Vermont.

Conclusion

Fiscal Year 2022 saw Vermont's Emergency Housing program in a state of transition. As the fiscal year began, DCF introduced a new set of Emergency Housing rules, intended to ensure the safety of Vermonters during the public health crisis. Adverse Weather Conditions began on November 4, 2021 and continued through June 30, 2022, allowing households to remain in stable housing for a much longer period than otherwise possible. As Adverse Weather Conditions drew to a close at the end of the fiscal year, DCF worked to implement the Transitional Housing Program to provide households with continued stable housing regardless of their eligibility for the more restrictive General Assistance Temporary Housing benefits. As Fiscal Year 2023 begins, DCF is currently housing approximately 1,500 households under Occupancy Agreements at 72 hotels around the state.

In the coming year, the federal Emergency Rental Assistance Program funding will end. Recognizing the expiration of federal funding and the inability to sustain the program through state funding, DCF will adapt the Transitional Housing Program beginning October 1, 2022 to ensure current participants receive shelter through end of March. New clients will be referred to pre-existing programs, such as shelters and the General Assistance program. DCF will continue to engage community partners, stakeholders, and providers on the future of the homelessness assistance system. DCF intends to ground the discussions in best practices, following U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development priorities, and responding to the current needs of Vermonters and our communities.

Appendix A: Links

Emergency Housing Waiver and Variance of Rules

<https://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/CVD19/ESD/Emergency-Housing-Rules-11.04.21.pdf>

Transitional Housing rules:

<https://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/ESD/Rules/FullRules/100-Transitional%20Housing.pdf>

General Assistance Temporary Housing rules:

<https://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/ESD/Rules/FullRules/2600-GA.pdf#page=64&zoom=188.51,-31,1>

HUD Definitions of Homelessness

https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/HomelessDefinition_RecordkeepingRequirementsandCriteria.pdf#:~:text=not%20present%20%20%20HOMELESS%20CRITERIA%20FOR%20DEFINING,who%3A%20%20%20Is%20%20...%20

Appendix B: Hotel Utilization by Households, Adults, and Children

Insert Graph Singles vs Families

