

# General Assistance (GA) Emergency Housing Program

JOINT HEARING WITH HOUSE COMMITTEES ON HUMAN SERVICES, AND GENERAL,  
HOUSING, AND MILITARY AFFAIRS

SEAN BROWN, COMMISSIONER, DEPARTMENT FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

OCTOBER 18, 2021

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# Work We've Done This Year to Address the Housing Crisis

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In partnership with hundreds of non-profits, towns and municipalities, lodging establishments, housing developers and our colleagues in state government:

Participate actively in the Chittenden Homeless Alliance, the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness, the Housing Recovery Working Group, and convene the Emergency Housing Working Group

Continue to work closely with the VDH Health Operations Center and Vermont Emergency Management

# Supported Safe Exits & Re-housed Vermonters

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**Rapid Resolution Housing Initiative** – More than 600 households worked with a housing navigator and accessed these flexible funds to help exit homelessness

**Money for Essentials Payments** for households existing GA

**CARES Housing Voucher Program** celebrated helping 332 families experiencing homelessness into permanent housing with services and a temporary rental voucher – households are now transitioning to a permanent rental voucher through VSHA

**Launched Reach Up ERAP** to facilitate access to rental assistance for Reach Up clients

# Maintained the Safety Net & Increased Emergency Shelter Capacity

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**Continued Motel-based Services (using both FEMA & ERAP funds)**

**Continuation of the Ho Hum Alternative Isolation/Quarantine Housing Site**

**Expanded street outreach services**

**Shelter capacity has increased above pre-COVID levels – Now serving more than 500 households per night**

**Several Shelter Projects under development** in multiple communities with varying timelines

# Increased Services to Help People Get and Keep Housing

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**Expanded Family Supportive Housing** by 45% in the past year now serving 250 families with intensive, home-based service coordination and covering 10 districts

**New Permanent Supportive Housing Benefit requested under the 1115 Medicaid Waiver** (intensive housing services to help people with higher needs keep housing)

More than **\$4m in ERAP Housing Stability Services grants** to 21 organizations in Vermont to provide:

- Outreach to eligible Vermont households
- Direct services support (1:1 application and recertification assistance)
- Landlord-tenant mediation services
- Landlord outreach and education
- Housing navigation services
- Legal services

# Homelessness in Vermont

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At the end of September, more than 2,200 households were experiencing homelessness, including an estimated 300 who are unsheltered. Per Coordinated Entry data.

Of those:

- More than one third had one or more trips to the ER in the past year
- More than one third have been in prison, jail or a correctional facility,
- At least one third are survivors of domestic/sexual violence
- Almost one third report a substance use disorder.
- Over 85% have been homeless for over ninety days, with 76% of all Vermonters experiencing homelessness for more than 300 days.

Many households face significant barriers to accessing housing, and will require a range of services to find and keep housing

# Vermonters in GA Motel Program - by district

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District/Motel	# of Households	# of Adults	# of Children
Barre District Office	121	149	46
Bennington District Office	112	133	55
Brattleboro District Office	91	101	31
Burlington District Office	257	293	97
Hartford District Office	59	71	14
Middlebury District Office	23	28	11
Morrisville District Office	42	50	24
Newport District Office	19	24	5
Rutland District Office	101	107	41
Springfield District Office	31	35	18
St Albans District Office	51	58	32
St Johnsbury District Office	43	51	28
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>950</b>	<b>1100</b>	<b>402</b>

# Vermonters in GA Motel Program - by eligibility

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Category	# of Households	# of Adults	# of Children
Denied access to rental	7	9	0
Disabled	627	690	0
DV	41	43	0
Family with child	219	293	402
Lost housing due to health code	7	11	0
Natural Disaster	4	6	0
Over Age 60	40	41	0
Pregnant	5	7	0
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>950</b>	<b>1100</b>	<b>402</b>

# GA Emergency Housing Working Group

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At the direction of the Legislature, the AHS and DCF convened the GA Emergency Housing Working Group to help identify a path forward for the GA Emergency Housing program understanding that GA program as implemented during the COVID-19 crisis is neither financially nor programmatically sustainable.

The Working Group agreed to a plan, including new eligibility rules, that was implemented June 1, 2021

The Working Group continues to inform DCF on the design and implementation of a sustainable, long-term plan for providing emergency housing for fiscal year 2023 that reduces or ends reliance, or both, on the General/Emergency Assistance Motel Voucher Program, per legislative request.

# New Eligibility Rules

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New rules were implemented on June 1, 2021 for new applicants and July 1, 2021 for existing recipients pursuant to the legislative adoption of the Emergency Housing Working Group proposal.

- The income threshold has been set at 185% of the FPL
- Households must meet categorical eligibility
- Households must be living in Vermont voluntarily and not for a temporary purpose
- Clients are required to engage in housing case management
- The program is approved for maximum of 84 days annually, with extensions waivers available for families with children and disabled Vermonters meeting certain criteria

The newly established eligibility rules greatly expand temporary housing assistance to Vermont households in both categorical eligibility and number of days eligible for housing.

# Challenges

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## **Motel Capacity**

- Number of motels participating in the program
- Number of rooms available at motels

## **Co-occurring and complex needs of participants**

- Aging Vermonters
- Vermonters with Disabilities
  - Mental Health
  - Substance Use Disorders

## **Lack of permanent housing stock**

# Motel Capacity

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Motels are also reducing the number of motel rooms available to recipients of GA motel vouchers.

- 19 out of 77 participating motels are reducing capacity or stopping participation in the program. Reasons include opening of the economy, return to serving travelers and tourists, and renovations.
- DCF continues to pay for capacity at motels including paying increased rates as the economy reopens.
- DCF anticipates continued pressure on motel capacity in the weeks and months to come for as both domestic and international travel resumes, and Vermont enters its ski season.

# Motel Capacity – by district

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District	Number of rooms available
St Albans District Office	3
Burlington District Office	0
Hartford District Office	0
St Johnsbury District Office	0
Lyndonville District Office	6
Barre District Office	3
Newport District Office	0
Rutland District Office	13
Springfield District Office	4
Bennington District Office	11
Morrisville District Office	1
Middlebury District Office	2

# Maintain the Safety Net

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- Extend the current pause of exits from the GA program
- Strengthen understanding of who is in motels and what barriers exist to exiting
  - We know that substance use, frequent and significant mental health issues, and medical and elder care needs are faced by many people in the program. The solutions involve organizations and agencies outside of DCF. By using existing data we can strengthen services.
- Provide transportation (as needed) for eligible GA participants when no rooms are available within the district to districts with capacity
  - DCF is already working with community organizations to create and coordinate transportation options for Vermonters unable to access emergency housing due to lack of transportation.

# Expand Permanent Housing

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- Request full funding of the Housing Recovery Plan as proposed by the Governor
- Establish a Rental Risk Mitigation Program to enhance investment security for landlords.
  - Provide landlords and motels with an incentive and added security to work with tenants receiving rental subsidy.
- Enhance the Vermont Housing Incentive Program (VHIP)
  - Enhance the VHIP program to bring hundreds more additional units online for Vermonters experiencing homelessness

# Support Safe Exits from the GA Program

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- Transition Motel Guests to Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) for long-term motel rentals
  - GA Emergency Housing participants can stay in place while transitioning out of the GA Emergency Housing Program and into Emergency Rental Assistance Program. ERAP can cover up to 18 months of rent.
- Sustain the Rapid Resolution Housing Initiative (RRHI) beyond CRF expiration
  - RRHI provides flexible funding Vermonters experiencing homelessness. These funds can meet the immediate needs of individuals and families experiencing homelessness and can be used to provide funding for deposits, transportation, elimination of debt, offset costs for home-sharing, moving costs, utility deposits, and other activities.

# Increase Emergency Shelter Capacity

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- Expand shelter capacity in high needs areas

As of September 1, there are approximately 400 beds and 95 rooms, or capacity for almost 500 households, in emergency shelter. Shelter capacity has been full.

While shelter capacity has increased above pre-COVID levels, more than 200 winter shelter beds have been lost.

# Additional Considerations

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- Expand Permanent Housing – Temporary pause of affordable housing preservation and rehabilitation projects that displace tenants
- Increase Emergency Shelter Capacity - Address zoning and permitting barriers for emergency shelters
- Support Services – Expand Family Supportive Housing (FSH)
- Support Services – Expedite Permanent Supportive Housing Benefit (Medicaid)