
Report to
The Vermont Legislature

GENERAL ASSISTANCE REPORT

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Submitted to: 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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Executive Summary

Vermont continues to grapple with many difficult issues around housing and homelessness – longer stays in shelters, scarcity of affordable housing where rental subsidies may be used, and limited availability of support services to pair with federal vouchers, as examples. The General and Emergency Assistance (GA) program is the program of last resort and sees the impact of these issues by increased utilization across all areas of need.

Over the last four years, we have seen continued success of the GA Community Investments as alternatives to the motel voucher program. However, GA Emergency Housing via motels remains a pressure point as the numbers of Vermonters experiencing homelessness and the duration of their homelessness is increasing. Unduplicated households accessing the motel voucher program have increased approximately 6% and length of stay has increased approximately 37% relative to the previous fiscal year. Historically, the GA emergency housing budget has not been funded at a level sufficient to meet the needs of vulnerable Vermonters. Last year that need exceeded the legislative appropriation by over \$2 million. This continues to challenge the Department's ability to meet the needs of Vermonters with housing crises while staying within the budgetary authority. A bright spot for the program has been the process used to move the GA Program Restructure initiative forward.

Evaluation of GA Program during FY19

Administered by the Economic Services Division (ESD) within the Department for Children and Families (DCF), the General Assistance Program (GA) is an emergency financial assistance program providing the basic necessities of life when those needs cannot be met by any other assistance program within DCF. Within the constellation of social safety nets administered by DCF, GA is designed to serve as the State's program of last resort. In this regard, it remains an important service to Vermonters as well as a key component of Vermont's system of care.

The GA Program offers emergency benefits in three areas of need: personal needs, support services, and emergency housing. "Personal needs" includes a small cash benefit intended to supplement 3SquaresVT and a small rent benefit. "Support Services" includes an array of emergency medical benefits; limited, emergency dental; current utility bill assistance; and burial benefits. "Emergency Housing" refers to the GA motel voucher program.

The GA program continues to face challenging budgetary and utilization demands. Pressure points include:

- *Support Services:* As with FY18, the GA Burial benefit continues to experience high utilization. In FY19, the Burial line of the GA budget exceeded the working budget by approximately \$200,000. Despite the overall continued pressure this represents, the volume of applications and the spend are on par with FY18. ESD received 564 applications for burial benefits in FY18, and 569 in FY19. This leveling, even for one year, represents a shift from the three years of increased utilization and expenditure we had previously seen.
- *Emergency Housing:* Over the past three fiscal years, utilization of the GA emergency housing program (under various eligibility: Vulnerable Population, Catastrophic, and Adverse Weather

Conditions) has seen a steady upward trend in the numbers of households and applications for the program. Significantly, the statewide number of unduplicated households accessing the motel voucher program increased approximately 6% relative to last fiscal year, and the number of unduplicated nights increased approximately 37%. As noted above, the current emergency housing budget has been insufficient to meet the need in average years, let alone in high utilization years such as FY19. Accordingly, we saw significant increases in the amount spent on the motel voucher program in FY19.

The increases in the aggregate data are concerning. More analysis and conversations with community partners are critical to better understand the complex factors driving increased utilization of motel vouchers. Aggregate data should not be conflated with District Office level data. District Office data shows different trends in different communities. While some localities may see marked rises in motel voucher utilization, other Districts have held steady or seen decreases. Where spending has held steady or decreased it has been in communities with significant GA Community Investments (e.g., seasonal shelters, DV motel pools, etc.) and/or strong, intentional coordination through the local homeless Continuum of Care. It is notable that all communities are experiencing a strain on their services and supports for Vermonters experiencing homelessness. The General Assistance program information, in combination with shelter usage data, paints a more accurate picture of how those services are being utilized.

Statewide 3 Year Comparison SFY2017 - SFY2019													
July - June													
Household Grants Unduplicated													
				Catastrophic		Auto Vuln							
July '18-June '19	# Households Granted	# Adults	# Children	DV	Other	65+	SSI	Under 6	Preg 3rd	Other	AWC	# HP Nights	# Nights
TOTALS	2503	2685	1306	593	389	18	460	211	9	14	809	9411	58803
July '17-June '18	# Households Granted	# Adults	# Children	DV	Other	65+	SSI	Under 6	Preg 3rd	Other	AWC	# HP Nights	# Nights
TOTALS	2362	2694	1273	510	254	14	435	202	9	20	918	9571	43066
July '16-June '17	# Households Granted	# Adults	# Children	DV	Other	65+	SSI	Under 6	Preg 3rd	Other	AWC	# HP Nights	# Nights
TOTALS	2280	2526	1182	594	200	12	429	209	8	12	816	10057	38279

GA Temp Housing	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019
<i># Applications</i>	13,262	15,084	17,882	20,673
<i># Applications Granted</i>	8,697	10,082	11,781	13,879
<i>Unduplicated Utilization by Household</i>	2,117	2,280	2,362	2503

As explained in previous legislative reports, the shift in 2015 by DCF to increase GA program investments into community-based initiatives has been a successful part of an otherwise challenged delivery system. These GA Community Investments provide funding to community providers who implement flexible, community-based alternatives to the motel voucher system. These projects serve clients in need of emergency housing and contribute towards a reduction in motel spending by the State.

FY19 GA Community Investments				
AHS District	# Years of GA Funding	Organization	Description	TOTAL GA AWARD
Barre	4, with 2 years expansion	Good Samaritan Haven	Operation of seasonal warming shelters for adults in Barre (14 beds) and Montpelier (20 beds) from November to April, and staffing including seasonal shelter coordinator, overnight staff and a contracted mental health clinician.	\$ 332,303
Barre	4	Capstone Community Action	6 units with 2 bedrooms each of emergency apartments for families with services.	\$ 137,309
Bennington	3	Bennington County Coalition for the Homeless	Operation of expanded emergency shelter at 966 Main with paid overnight staffing.	\$ 75,000
Bennington	3	Project Against Violent Encounters (PAVE)	Operation of year-round shelter with capacity of 5 rooms for families. Funds for overflow motel vouchers, and services to meet the full emergency shelter need for all persons fleeing domestic/sexual violence in the district.	\$ 68,612
Brattleboro	4, with 2 years expansion	Groundworks Collaborative	Shelter operation, services and overnight staff for seasonal warming shelter in Brattleboro (November – April) with capacity of 33 beds for adults.	\$ 143,000
Brattleboro	4	Southeastern Vermont Community Action (SEVCA)	Motel-based housing specialist providing housing support services.	\$ 30,000
Brattleboro	4	Women's Freedom Center	Operation of a new 6 room emergency shelter, funds for overflow motel vouchers, and services to meet the full emergency shelter need for all persons fleeing domestic/sexual violence in the district.	\$ 198,439
Burlington	1	Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS)	Additional seasonal shelter overnight staff at the Waystation.	\$ 32,000
Burlington	3	Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity (CVOEO)	Operation of a very short-term overflow shelter during extreme cold weather conditions	\$ 10,000
Burlington	3, prior year project was with COTS	Community Health Centers of Burlington - Safe Harbor	Shelter operation and essential services for seasonal warming shelter in Burlington (November – April) with capacity of 37 beds for adults	\$ 287,885
Hartford	4, with scope change for last 2 years	Upper Valley Haven	Operation of seasonal shelter with 15 beds for adults.	\$ 55,000
Middlebury	4	Charter House Coalition	Operation of seasonal shelter in Middlebury (November – April) with capacity of 5 rooms for families.	\$ 26,000
Middlebury	4	John Graham Housing & Services	2 units with 2 bedrooms each of emergency shelter in Addison County for families (including those fleeing domestic/sexual violence).	\$ 22,200
Morrisville	1	Lamoille Community House	Operation of seasonal shelter for adults in Lamoille County (12 beds), and capital funds to support facility renovation.	\$ 101,420
Rutland	3	BROC Community Action in Southwestern Vermont	Operation of a very short-term overflow shelter during extreme cold weather conditions.	\$ 10,000
Rutland	3	NewStory Center	Support for increased shelter capacity (4 rooms/8 beds), funds for overflow motel vouchers, and services to meet the full emergency shelter need for all persons fleeing domestic/sexual violence in the district.	\$ 375,000
St. Johnsbury	4	Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA)	Operation of a seasonal warming shelter in St. Johnsbury (November – April) with a capacity of 10 beds.	\$ 88,888
TOTAL				\$ 1,993,056

Since implementation of this model, the DCF Housing Team has seen marked success by many projects. Seasonal warming shelters are an effective use of GA emergency housing funds in many regions. This model can provide more cost-effective emergency housing and a critical service connection for clients. In FY19, GA funds supported seasonal warming shelters in Brattleboro, Burlington, Barre, Middlebury, Hartford, Hyde Park, and St. Johnsbury. However, it is important to note that a seasonal warming shelter is not the appropriate approach to addressing homelessness in all communities nor for all people experiencing homelessness, especially families with children and/or those fleeing domestic or sexual violence. Additionally, the success of reducing motel utilization through these community partners does not speak to the growing operational challenges that shelter providers report when serving individuals and families with complicated co-occurring mental health and substance use challenges.

Likewise, we have seen excellent results from GA Community Investments operated by domestic violence advocate organizations. NewStory Center in Rutland, Women’s Freedom Center in Brattleboro, and PAVE in Bennington all operated models in which they, as the community partner, manage additional shelter capacity and operate their own motel pool for shelter overflow. Notably, these community investments reduced the length of stay relative to the GA motel voucher system while also providing more comprehensive supports for clients. We strongly encourage continued replication of these models as funding allows and are working with partner organizations across the state to determine what models might work well in those other communities.

Recommendations for Changes to the Program

In the FY18 GA Report, DCF noted that an initiative to Restructure the GA Program had been underway. The goal of that undertaking is to design and implement an intentional program that builds on behavioral science to provide a program that is simpler for clients to understand and access, and for ESD District Office staff to administer. DCF proposed to do this by eliminating the overly complicated parts of the current program; providing support and benefits that actively help clients; respecting the limited bandwidths of clients and staff; and exercising fiscal responsibility.

DCF is still pursuing the GA Restructure and much headway has been made in terms of the proposed framework and considerations for operationalizing a new program structure. Because of the scope and scale of this change, we are focused on a design process that is intentional and transparent. DCF has been diligent in working with community stakeholders during this process. This has included conversations with client focus groups in all 12 ESD District Office service regions, ESD District Office staff, community service providers and advocates across the state, extended provider networks through regional presentations, and staff across the Agency of Human Services. Stakeholder conversations have provided invaluable feedback as DCF continues to evaluate how to implement this restructure.

It has become clear during our work with stakeholders, clients, and staff that the most direct way to confront the challenge is moving away from a reliance on the motel voucher program and towards community-based responses to the housing crisis. In doing so, DCF could shift the entirety of the GA emergency housing budget to communities for the identification and implementation of local crisis responses for emergency housing needs. This shift would allow the State to serve as an active facilitator of community conversations and plans – providing supports and technical assistance in addition to flexible funding. It also would offer service providers greater opportunity to implement programs that address the unique housing needs in their communities.

Plan for Continued Implementation of the Program

While the GA Restructure is a work in progress, ESD continues to operate GA consistent within current rules and procedures. The day-to-day implementation of the program is undertaken through a lens of continuous quality improvement, searching for ways to improve the program's offerings in the current framework while also looking at the bigger picture of the future. ESD is moving forward with utilizing the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) administered by the Institute for Community Alliances (ICA) and used by Vermont's Continua of Care. We expect to be shifting to this system in the First Quarter of FY20.

Emergency Housing Data Collection Processes

The 12 ESD district offices collect the following data daily and submit a weekly spreadsheet to ESD central office for a monthly and year-to-date statewide compilation:

- Total number of emergency housing requests
- Emergency housing requests granted/denied
- Number of singles granted/denied housing
- Number of families granted/denied housing
- Number of adults and children in households requesting and granted housing
- Number of eligible catastrophic requests/number granted
- Number of categorically-eligible vulnerable population requests/number granted
- Number of eligible vulnerable points requests/number granted
- Total number of nights authorized/average cost per night/total cost for authorized nights
- Number of Adverse Weather Condition (AWC) grants/number of adults granted under AWC/number of children granted under AWC
- Number of AWC nights authorized/average cost per night/total cost for CWE nights authorized

The above data are collected manually in the district and central offices because DCF's ACCESS system is not designed to collect this data. Payments for emergency housing are made based on motel billing through ESD authorization forms. Once billing is received from a motel by ESD, the local district office authorizes payment through the ACCESS system which generates payment to the motel. The DCF Business Office generates a monthly report reflecting all payments made for emergency housing.

Over the course of FY19, ESD has been pursuing entrance into HMIS. VT HMIS is the statewide data collection and storage tool for client-level data and services to households experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness. The Agency and Department have directed ESD to use the Vermont HMIS system mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and implemented by both Continua of Care in Vermont.¹

¹ There are two federal jurisdiction Homeless "Continua of Care (CoC)" in Vermont: the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness (VCEH) and the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance (CCHA). These CoCs are a partnership of local service and shelter providers, housing providers, state agencies, etc. who work together to address homelessness at the local level. The CoCs also oversee federal homeless funding for their respective geographic areas.

Participation in HMIS will:

- 1) Provide more accurate data, a function critical for making informed policy and budgetary decisions;
- 2) benefit the Continuum of Care's statewide applications for competitive HUD funding; and
- 3) allow ESD to more productively participate in the statewide Coordinated Entry system of care and service provision.

Statistics and Data

A summary of emergency housing requests, including catastrophic and vulnerable populations, for the period of July 2018 to June 2019 follows:

- **20,672** emergency housing applications were received, of these:
 - **13,879** were granted; **6793** were denied.
 - **9636** household without children were granted; **5638** households without children were denied.
 - **4246** households with children were granted; **1156** households with children were denied.
 - **16,158 adults in households** were granted.
 - **7827 children in households** were granted.
 - **3667** applications were found eligible under the catastrophic criteria.
 - **2187** applications were found eligible under the vulnerable population criteria.
 - **42** applications were found eligible under vulnerable points.
- **43,629** bed nights were paid for at an average cost of **\$77.69/night**.
- **8,201** bed nights were contracted through Harbor Place.

Adverse Weather Conditions

Per the Commissioner's discretion and in current policy, Adverse Weather Conditions (AWC) exist between November and April when the ambient air or windchill temperature is less than 20 degrees Fahrenheit or the temperature is less than 32 degrees Fahrenheit with a greater than 50% chance of precipitation. The first AWC night for this period occurred on November 17. There were 124 AWC nights during the fiscal year – low ambient air temperature was the most prevalent factor followed by wind chill readings lower than 20 degrees Fahrenheit and then the chance of precipitation greater than 50% with a temperature less than 32 degrees Fahrenheit. This represents a decrease from FY18 which saw a total of 135 AWC nights. A little over one half of approved applications for emergency housing were done so under AWC.

Conclusion

Like last year, FY19 has been a critical year for the evolution of the GA Program. Although the current state rules are still in place, DCF and community partners have engaged in a tremendous amount of work regarding the Restructure initiative. Moving forward intentionally with the Restructure, in conversation with community partners, is critical to ensuring the transition of Vermont's program of last resort is executed thoughtfully, thoroughly, and with integrity. Continued fiscal pressures have caused challenges but those pressures yielded opportunities to dig into the Restructure process from a different perspective. This deeper dive enabled DCF to think critically and creatively about how to best modernize and improve the GA Program while being thoughtful about the significant stresses on the systems of care for homelessness and housing in Vermont.

The Department will be drafting and submitting new rules for the revamped GA Program in early 2020 with a target implementation on July 1, 2020. As GA Community Investments have proven successful at reducing reliance on motels, managing expenditures, and providing a more effective service delivery model, the Department anticipates strengthening this approach in providing emergency housing as part of the GA Restructure. More focus on these community investments will allow greater flexibility for service providers to implement programs that address the housing needs in their communities.

APPENDIX A: Aggregate GA Housing (July 2018 – June 2019)

Housing Applications

Total # Housing Request	# Housing Requests Granted	# Housing Requests Denied	# Households without Children Granted	# Households without Children Denied	# Households with Children Granted	# Households with Children Denied	Total # Adults Granted	Total # Children Granted
20,672	13,879	6,793	9,636	5,638	4,246	1,156	16,158	7,827

Granted Housing Categories

# Catastrophic Grants	# Vulnerable Population Grants	# Vulnerable Points Grants	# Fair Hearing Officer Ordered Grants	# AWC Grants
3,667	2,187	42	0	7,983

Estimated Housing Costs

# of Non AWC Uncontracted Nights Granted	Non AWC Average Cost Per Night	Non AWC Estimated Total Costs	# of AWC Uncontracted Nights Granted	AWC Average Cost Per Night	AWC Estimated Total Costs	Combined # Uncontracted Nights Granted	Combined Estimated Total Costs
43,629	\$ 77.69	\$3,307,235.56	16,228	\$54.88	\$883,000.68	59,857	\$4,190,236.24

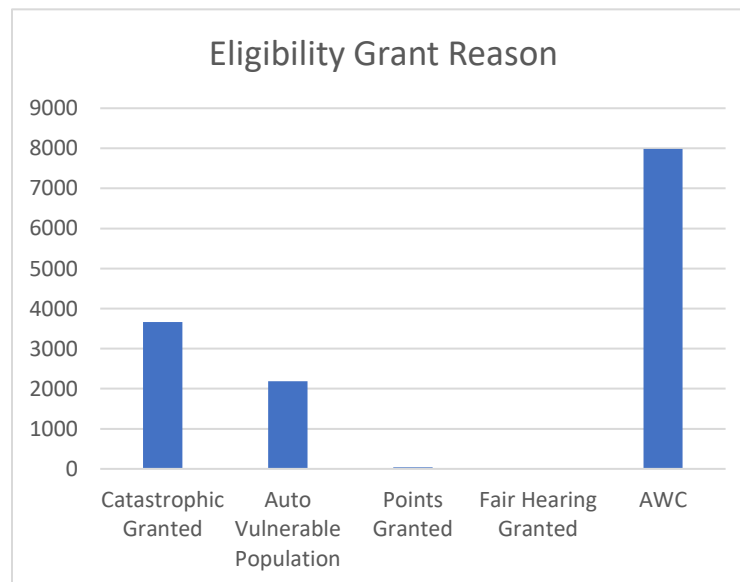
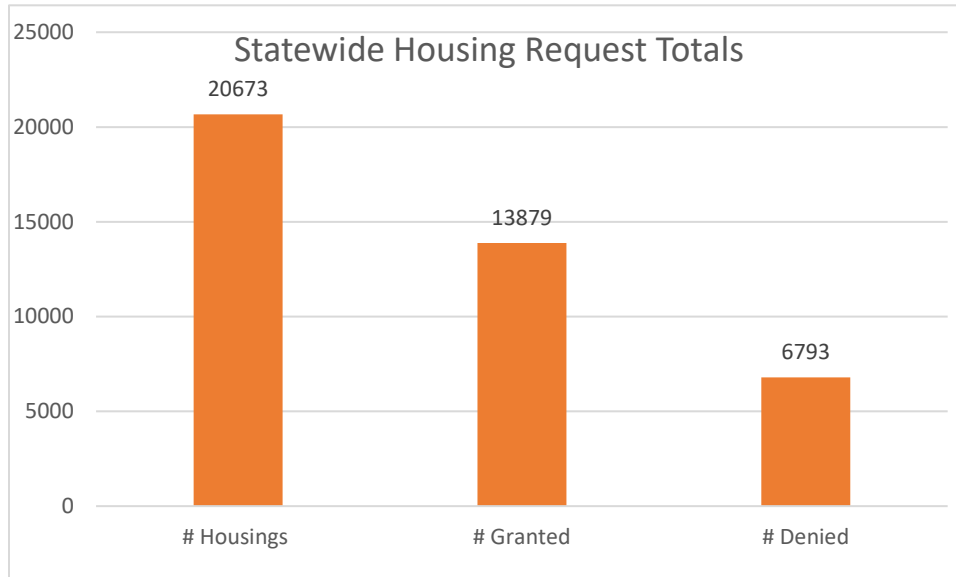
- Total # of Harbor Place Nights: 8,201
- Total # of AWC Harbor Place Nights: 1,186
- “uncontracted nights” denote those exclusive of the Harbor Place contract

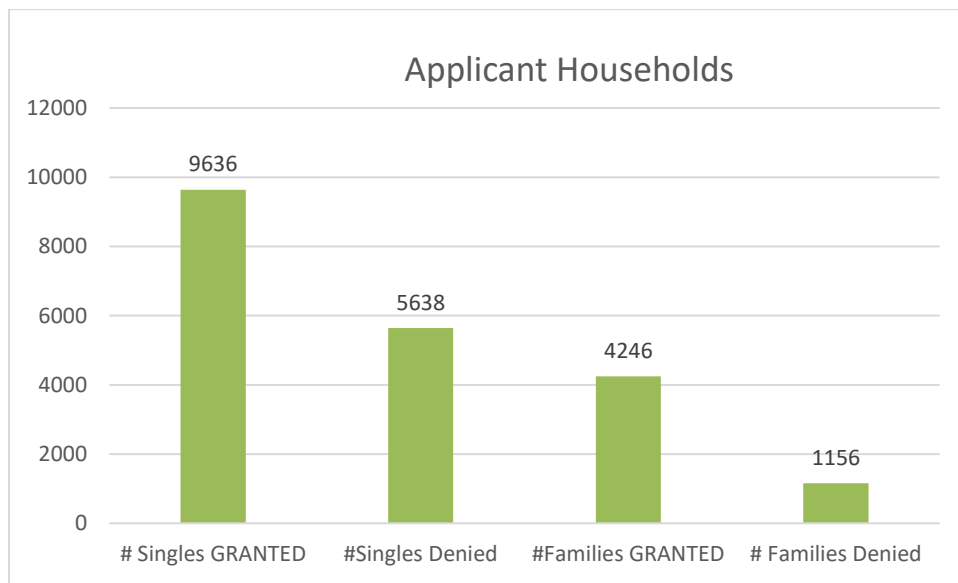
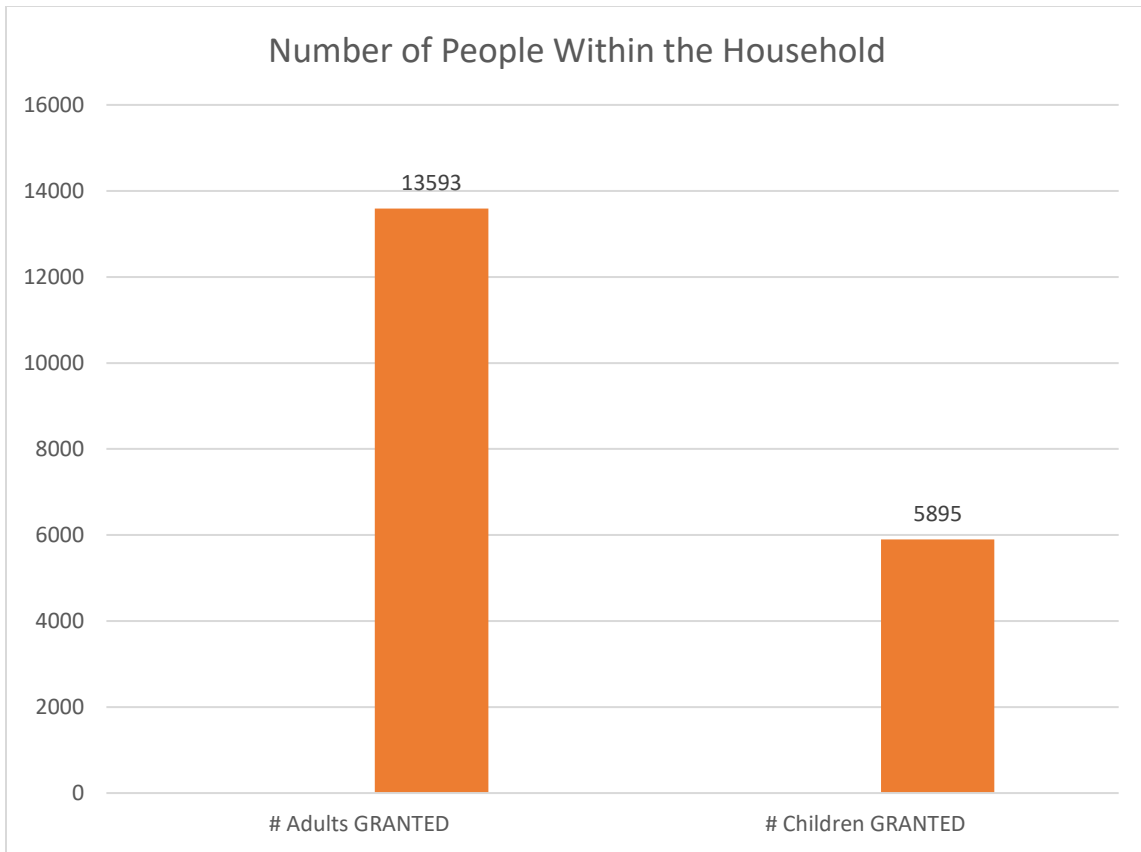
APPENDIX B: GA Housing Denial Data (July 2018 - June 2019)

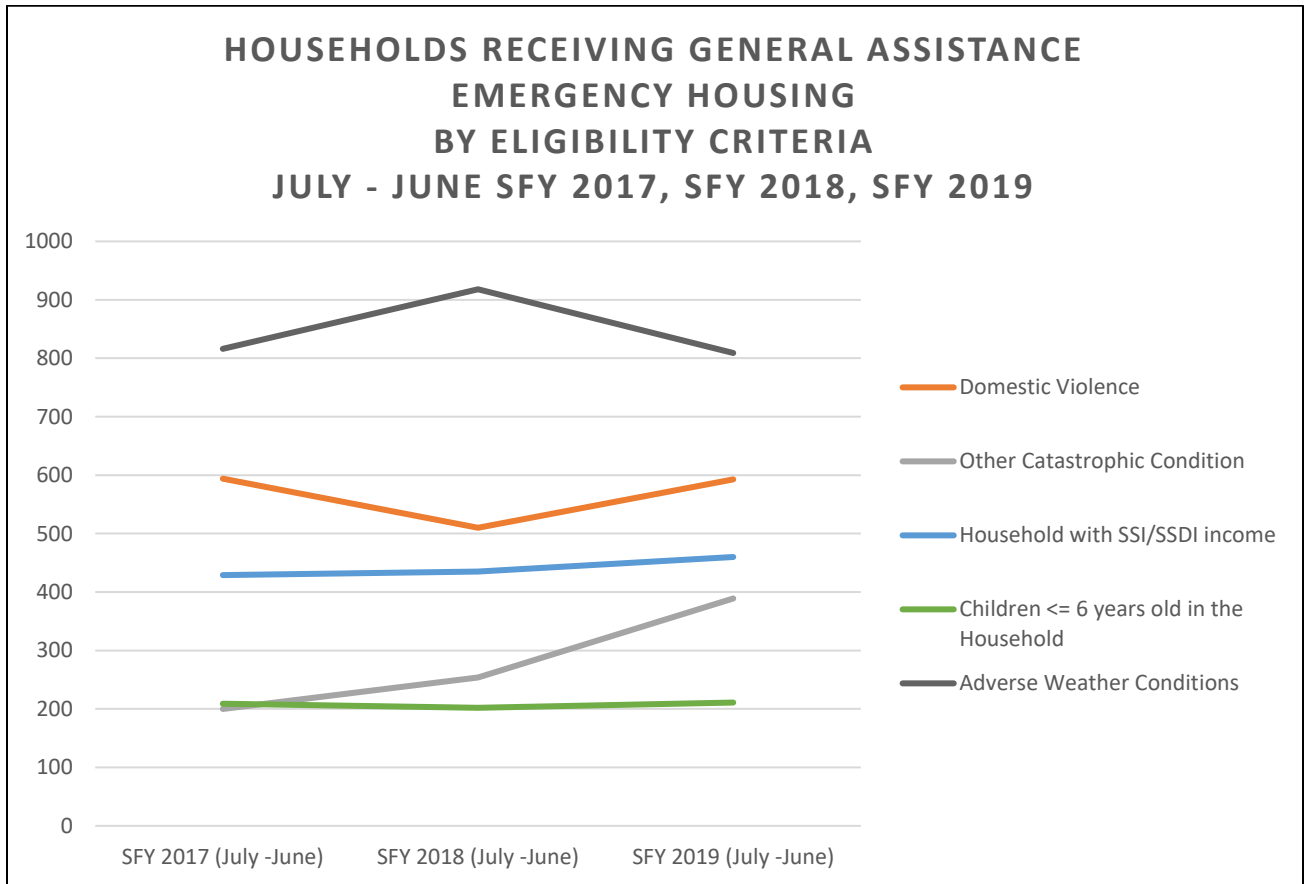
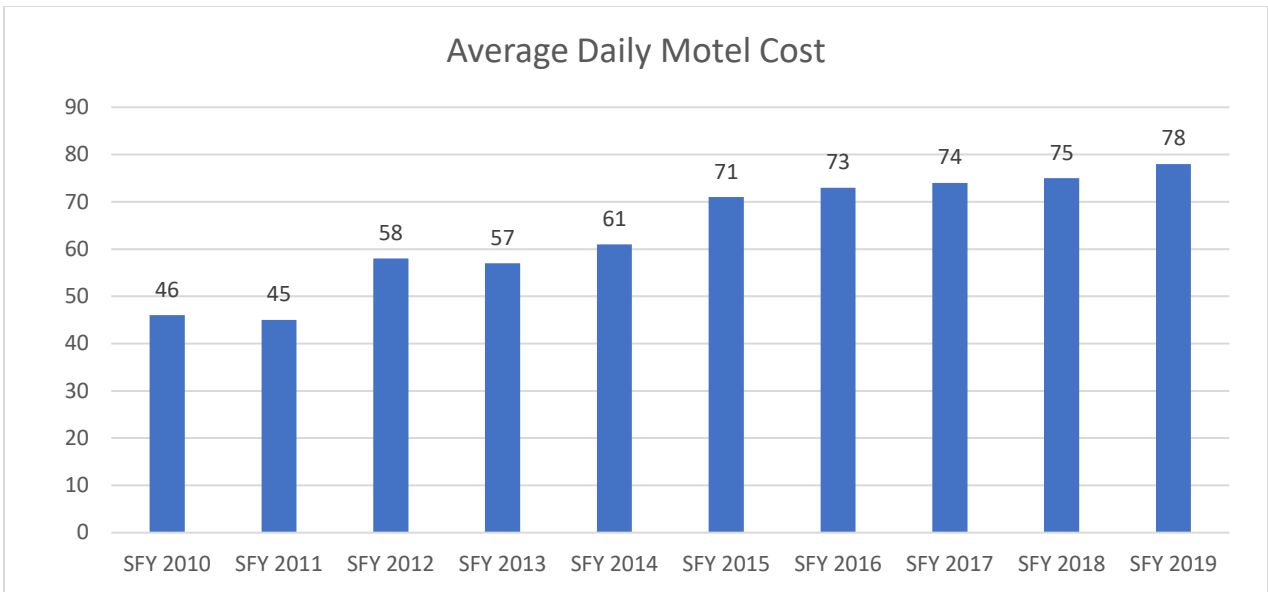
July 2018 - June 2019 G/EA Denials							
Total Denied Applications							
6675							
Households with Adults ONLY				Households with Child(ren)			
Top 5 Denial Reasons				Top 5 Denial Reasons			
		5640	84%			1125	17%
1	Has Other Housing Options	1793	32%	1	Has Other Housing Options	385	34%
2	Ineligible	1609	29%	2	Ineligible	183	16%
3	Verification Required	508	9%	3	Caused Homelessness	132	12%
4	No Interview	365	6%	4	Available Resources	123	11%
5	Max Nights	311	6%	5	Max Nights	120	11%

APPENDIX C: GA Housing Data Tables (Statewide: July 2018 – June 2019)

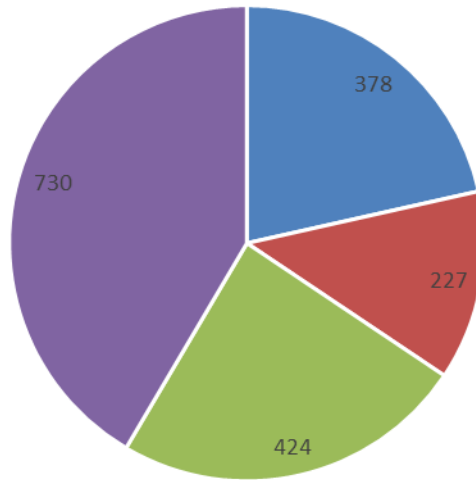
Statewide Temporary Housing Data for July 2018 – June 2019



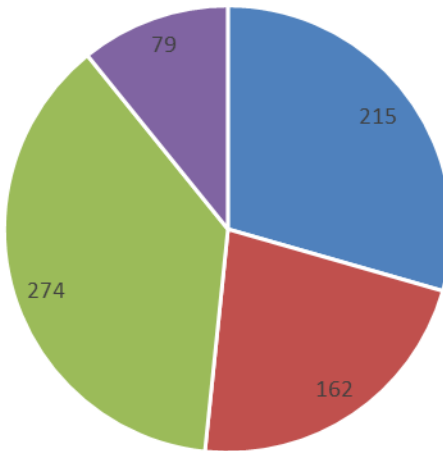




GA/EA Temporary Housing Unduplicated Single Household Case Count



GA/EA Temporary Unduplicated Family Household Case Count



APPENDIX D: Primary Stated Cause of Homelessness

Primary Causes of Homelessness in Vermont	St. Albans	Burlington	Hartford	St. Johnsbury	Brattleboro	Barre	Newport	Rutland	Springfield	Bennington	Morrisville	Middlebury	Statewide Ranking	Combined districts' ranking across state in each category of homelessness
Benefit Issues (SSI, UC, CS, Voucher, St Assistance)														0
Chronic Homelessness	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	12
Could not afford housing										3				1
Domestic Violence/Child Abuse	2	2	2	2	5	2	4	5	2		2	2	3	11
Eviction with Cause	4	4	4	5	2	5	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	12
Eviction without Cause/Non-renewal	5	5	5	4	4	4	3	2	3	5	4	3	4	12
Job Loss/Unemployment/Underemployment														0
Kicked out of Family/Friends	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	3	4	2	3	4	2	12
Overcrowded/Underhoused														0
Unexpected Expenses (car repair)														0
STATEWIDE - Top Five Stated Causes of Homelessness for persons applying for GA Temporary Housing														
Chronic Homelessness	1													
Kicked out of Family/Friends	2													
Domestic Violence/Child Abuse	3													
Eviction without Cause/Non-renewal	4													
Eviction with Cause	5													