

February 27, 2024

Re: HHAV Testimony to the Members of the Legislative Joint Fiscal Committee

Dear Members of the Legislative Joint Fiscal Committee:

The Housing & Homelessness Alliance of Vermont (HHAV) represents a merger of the Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition and the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness, two organizations with deep-rooted histories in our state. As a merged organization, HHAV leverages the expertise of our board and over 60-member organizations to meet the needs of vulnerable Vermonters and advocate for effective policies to ensure that all people living in Vermont have safe, stable, affordable homes and if homelessness occurs, it is brief, rare, and non-recurring.

To level set the crisis Vermont faces, here are some facts from the most recent Point in Time count (2023).

- Vermont had the 2nd highest rate of unhoused people per capita in the country.ⁱ
- Vermont's crisis is getting worse – with an 18.5 percent increase in unhoused people between 2022 and 2023 and a 218.4 percent increase in unhoused people between 2007 and 2023.ⁱⁱ
- Vermont has the largest percentage increase in family homelessness since the pandemic began (a 213 percent increase or 794 more people between 2020 and 2023).ⁱⁱⁱ

The data is clear - Vermont has a major need for shelter.

Vermont does not have an adequate plan to ensure shelter for those in need. There is currently a statewide shelter capacity of 548 households, and all are full.^{iv} In addition, there are 1,661 households currently sheltered under the GA Emergency Housing Program.^v The Administration has proposed a plan for the remainder of FY24 that would result in the loss of shelter for over 2,000 of Vermonters.

- The Plan: The Governor asked for \$4 million to set up shelters in five communities, some of which may be congregate.^{vi} Assuming each of the proposed shelters was on the maximum end as proposed by the Governor (50 beds)^{vii} and able to be constructed in a matter of weeks, which is unrealistic, that would provide a total of 250 temporary beds (through June 30).
- The Result: We are forced to make an apples to oranges comparison since the Governor's proposal calls for a maximum of 250 beds and the current need filled by the GA Emergency Housing Program is 1,661 households. The state estimates that each household equates to 1.6 people, so according to the state's calculation there are 2,257 people sheltered under the GA Emergency Housing Program. Thus, under the Administration's FY24 proposal we would see approximately 2,007 Vermonters (2,257 minus 250) lose their shelter.

The human and economic costs of failing to provide shelter are greater than the costs of shelter. Homelessness is linked with a broad range of negative health conditions, including premature death. People experiencing homelessness also are far more likely than the general population to be a victim of crime. Unsheltered homelessness is harsh and alienating. In addition, the economic costs associated with the failure to provide shelter - including on health systems, schools, criminal legal systems, and other public services - fall on municipalities and the state to cover.

Black Vermonters are unhoused at a staggering rate. Black people account for just 1.4 percent of Vermont's population, yet account for over eight percent of Vermont's unhoused population in 2023.^{viii} In

Chittenden County, Black people make up just 2.93 percent of the county's population, yet account for 14.91 percent of the unhoused population.^{ix} As this data clearly show, the homelessness crisis has been disproportionately felt by Black Vermonters. This cannot continue – the state must address the racial justice impact of its decisions and ensure that this crisis is reversed.

Couch surfing (temporary stays with friends or relatives) does not constitute “self-resolving” for people experiencing homelessness. The Administration and some legislators have previously indicated that people who are forcibly exited from the GA motel program will “self-resolve” by “couch surfing.” It is true that some people in the GA program have answered “couch surfing” as what they plan to do if they are forced out of their motel room. However, serial temporary stays with friends or relatives still constitutes homelessness under HUD's official definition. It also is an unsustainable arrangement for both the guest and the host, and it actually adds to homelessness by exposing hosts to eviction from rental units for housing people who are not named on their lease.

Congregate shelter is a less effective option. COVID is still present in Vermont,^x thus placing people in congregate settings at increased risk of exposure and the potential health consequences of that exposure. In addition, research suggests that non-congregate interim housing offers many additional benefits compared to the congregate model, including a greater feeling of stability, safety, health, and well-being for individuals in interim housing, more high-quality engagement with staff, reduced interpersonal conflict, greater focus on future goals, and designated personal space and security for belongings.^{xi}

Vermont's housing and homelessness crises will take sustained long-term investments to fully solve. Vermont's dual housing and homelessness crises are the result of multiple factors, including a lack of sufficient permanently affordable housing units, skyrocketing housing and construction costs, more people moving to Vermont, increasing short term rentals, a failure to ensure a living wage, insufficient access to healthcare, a failure to provide adequate mental health and substance use services (and continuing to criminalize people who use drugs), and more. While we urge the legislature to make the sustained long-term investments necessary to ensure perpetually affordable housing, including any necessary support services, to meet the demand, we also urge the legislature to provide the resources necessary to ensure sufficient interim housing while we get there.

We also urge the Committee to ask the Administration the following questions:

- Black Vermonters account for just 1.4 percent of Vermont's population,^{xii} yet accounted for over eight percent of Vermont's unhoused population in 2023.^{xiii}
 - What are the racial demographics of the GA Emergency Housing Program, including by cohort and what is the racial justice impact of not sheltering all cohorts?
- The GA Program's definition of disability is limited to people who have been found eligible for SSI or SSDI by the Social Security Administration. This narrow criteria does not include all people with disabilities under Vermont law as well as people with serious medical conditions that do not meet the definition of disability.
 - How many individuals in the GA Program have a disability under Vermont law, but would not meet the criteria under the GA program?
 - How many people in the GA Program have a serious medical condition, but do not meet the GA Program's disability criteria?
- In addition to the harms that unhoused people will face, pushing people out of shelters is resource intensive for our communities, which will bear the brunt of the costs.
 - How should our municipalities plan for the displacement costs that will hit their health systems, schools, criminal legal systems, and other services if people lose their shelter?
 - What do you estimate these displacement costs will be in dollars for each municipality?
 - What resources does the state have to provide to municipalities to cover these costs/needs?

- How will you ensure that people who lose their shelter are not criminalized for acts that are a necessary part of everyday life (e.g. urination in public or sleeping in public) - in effect criminalizing unhoused peoples' very existence?

Thank you for considering our positions. I would be happy to discuss these or any other proposals.

Sincerely,



Frank Knaack
Executive Director

ⁱ U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, The 2023 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, Part 1 - PIT Estimates of Homelessness, Dec. 2023, p. 16, available at <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2023-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ *Id* at p. 113.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Id* at p. 46.

^{iv} As of Feb. 22, 2024. On file with HHAV.

^v January 31st Pandemic-Era Hotel/Motel Housing Reporting, State of Vermont, Jan 31, 2024, available at <https://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Legislative-Reports/Pandemic-Era-Housing-Report-Jan-2024.pdf>. (The number 1,661 includes: 634 “cohort” households, 178 “non-cohort” households, and 849 “Adverse Weather Conditions” households.)

^{vi} See, See, Carly Berlin, Key questions loom as Vermont prepares to ramp down pandemic-era motel program, VT Digger, Jan. 5, 2024, available at <https://vtdigger.org/2024/01/05/key-questions-loom-as-vermont-prepares-to-ramp-down-pandemic-era-motel-program/>; see also, Waterbury Roundabout, Lawmakers hear plan to use Waterbury armory as a 40-50-bed emergency shelter, VT Digger, Jan. 26, 2024, available at <https://vtdigger.org/2024/01/26/lawmakers-hear-plan-to-use-waterbury-armory-as-a-40-50-bed-emergency-shelter/>.

^{vii} *Id*.

^{viii} Chittenden County Homeless Alliance & the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness, Vermont’s Annual Point in Time Count (2023), p. 10, available at <https://helpingtohousevt.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023-Vermont-Point-in-Time-Report-6-6-23.pdf>.

^{ix} Chittenden County Homeless Alliance & the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness, Vermont’s Annual Point in Time Count (2023), p. 10, available at <https://helpingtohousevt.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023-Vermont-Point-in-Time-Report-6-6-23.pdf>.

^x There were 275 cases of COVID and 39 new hospital admissions during the week of Jan. 14 – 20, 2024 in Vermont according to the State of Vermont’s Weekly COVID-19 Surveillance Report, Jan. 24, 2024, available at <https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/document/COVID-19-Surveillance-report-20240124.pdf>.

^{xi} See, Gregg Colburn, et. al., Hotels as Noncongregate Emergency Shelters: An Analysis of Investments in Hotels as Emergency Shelter in King County, Washington During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Housing Policy Debate, Jun. 8, 2022, available at

https://www.nlihc.org/sites/default/files/HPD_Hotels_Noncongregate_Shelter.pdf; See also, Ryan Finnigan, Shelter and Safety Among People Experiencing Homelessness During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Turner Center for Housing Innovation, May 2022, available at <https://turnercenter.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Shelter-and-Safety-May-2022.pdf>.

^{xii} Chittenden County Homeless Alliance & the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness, Vermont’s Annual Point in Time Count (2023), p. 10, available at <https://helpingtohousevt.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023-Vermont-Point-in-Time-Report-6-6-23.pdf>.

^{xiii} *Id*.