SCOTT ADMINISTRATION ANNOUNCES PATH FORWARD FOR VERMONTERS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

18 OCTOBER 2021

Plan addresses immediate needs, while prioritizing permanent housing as the long-term solution

Montpelier, Vt. – The Scott Administration today outlined a comprehensive plan to address the housing needs of Vermonters experiencing homelessness, including the need to fully fund Governor Scott’s $249 million Housing Recovery Plan which includes historic funding for permanent housing for the homeless.

As part of this plan, Administration officials announced an extension to the current General Assistance (GA) Emergency Housing Program until December 31, and other meaningful actions to support Vermonters experiencing homelessness and permanent housing development.

“I appreciate the thoughtful work of our housing and human services experts to identify both short term supports to transition people into more sustainable housing options and a path for a long term solution that will provide permanent housing for those experiencing homelessness,” said Governor Scott. “To make this plan a reality, we've proposed to the legislature historic investments in housing to help people move out of homelessness, benefiting them and their communities.”

The proposal has been presented to legislators, and can be viewed below:

As of October 14, the Department for Children and Families (DCF) is serving 950 households, representing 1,100 adults and 402 children. Prior to the pandemic, the program provided emergency housing for roughly 2,500 Vermonters annually. Those in GA Emergency Housing currently are some of the most vulnerable, including Vermonters with disabilities, families with children, and households who have faced chronic housing instability. Demand for emergency housing and shelter is a symptom of Vermont’s current housing crisis. Ultimately, permanent housing solutions, not simply emergency housing and shelters, are needed.
Throughout the pandemic DCF and the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) have met and coordinated with towns and municipalities, first responders, homeless shelter/service providers, homeownership centers, affordable housing developers, community justice centers, designated agencies, public housing authorities, hospitals and health centers, advocates, private landlords and people with lived experiences. DCF and DHCD meet bi-weekly with VSHA, VHFA and VHCB as part of the housing recovery workgroup. More recently during this pause, the Departments have sought the input of stakeholders to propose the following actions to address the current housing crisis.

To be able to support the housing plan, we must fully fund Governor Scott's Housing Recovery Plan. On April 6, 2021, Governor Scott called for $249 million in capital funding for housing as part of his Economic Recovery and Revitalization Plan. To achieve this level of ARPA investment, the Legislature must release an additional $179 million in ARPA funding to help create affordable, permanent housing. It is important to send a strong signal that more funding is coming, so housing developers continue pre-development work to ensure projects will be ready as soon as possible.

**Maintain the Safety Net**

- **Extend to the current pause until December 31, 2021** to ensure that the most vulnerable Vermonters remain housed during Vermont's inclement winter. During the continued pause, GA clients will still be required to recertify eligibility, receive housing support services and work on their housing plan. This pause can be implemented due to the extension of FEMA funding at no cost to the state.

- **Provide transportation (as needed) for eligible GA participants when no rooms are available within the district**

DCF is working with community organizations to create and coordinate transportation options for Vermonters unable to access emergency housing due to lack of transportation. DCF has $300,000 of CRF available for transportation needs through December 2021. DCF anticipates an additional need of $600,000 to continue transportation through SFY22.

- **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 we serve, and the solutions involve organizations and agencies outside of DCF and DHCD. By using existing data (Coordinated Entry) and partner relationships, we can strengthen services.

**Support Safe Exits from the General Assistance Program**

- **Transition Motel Guests to Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) for long-term motel rentals**
Housing Program and into Emergency Rental Assistance Program. In this separate program, individuals will rent from the lodging establishment and re-apply every three months to DCF to support 100% of their room rent. The Emergency Rental Assistance Program will operate as a separate program from the GA Emergency Housing Program. ERAP can cover up to 18 months of rent. It is anticipated that the existing ERAP I & II award would be more than sufficient to support this in SFY22 and SFY23.

- **Sustain the Rapid Resolution Housing Initiative (RRHI) beyond Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) expiration**

The flexible funds provide one-time/short term financial assistance to help households exit to safe housing. Almost 600 households have used RRHI funds to address housing barriers and increase housing options. DCF anticipates an additional cost of $500,000 to maintain this assistance.

**Expand Permanent Housing**

- **Establish a Rental Risk Mitigation Program.** Provide landlords and motels with an incentive and added security to work with tenants receiving rental subsidy. Funds could support up to $5,000 in qualifying damages caused by a tenant during tenancy, as well as fill other important gaps unaddressed by ERAP and other funding. In order to establish a rental risk mitigation program, including administration costs, DCF anticipates an additional need of $1,512,500.

- **Enhance the Vermont Housing Incentive Program (VHIP).** With current funding, VHIP will have aided over 340 rental units for people experiencing homelessness. With additional funding proposed through ARPA, we could bring hundreds of additional units online for Vermonters experiencing homelessness.

**Increase Emergency Shelter Capacity**

While shelter capacity has increased above pre-COVID levels, more than 200 winter shelter beds have been lost. Motel capacity remains strained, with no capacity for GA clients in many districts regularly.

- **Expand shelter capacity in high needs areas.** DCF can work with BGS to identify possible un/underutilized dorms, vacant spaces that may be converted or other lease options and then partner with community organizations to operate larger emergency shelters in these locations, even if time-limited (2 years or less). This solution may be most viable in districts with higher populations.

The Department for Children and Families and the Department of Housing and Community Development view the current crisis as an opportunity to shift towards housing crisis response system that can re-house Vermonters experiencing homelessness quickly and for the long term.
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