

Autumn is a time for change for all of us: weather and routines; a re-set in many ways. What fall is not meant to encompass is a significant change in housing status, having the potential to impact health, sense of well-being, and personal safety. Unfortunately for 425 people in Chittenden County, this change of season brings a threat to their housing and stability.

The General Assistance Emergency Housing Program provides shelter to households who are experiencing homelessness due to disability, recent eviction, and natural disaster. This program, managed by the Agency of Human Services, ensures households experiencing homelessness have access to safe accommodation through motels and hotels across the Vermont. This statewide program provides shelter to over 1400 households while they wait for affordable housing to become available.

Despite anecdotal reports, people are not coming to our state because of this program, as evidenced from recent reporting (<https://vtdigger.org/2024/09/06/is-vermonts-motel-program-a-magnet-for-out-of-staters-experiencing-homelessness/>). Due to the lack of sufficient funding for affordable housing development, increase in demand for substance use and mental health services, and avoidance of approving just-cause eviction, this is a homegrown problem that only continues to rise. Our community-minded, tiny state has held the distinction of the second-highest rate of homelessness for two years in a row according to annual Point in Time counts (<https://vtdigger.org/2023/12/29/vermonts-rates-of-homelessness-are-still-among-the-worst-in-the-nation/>). However, despite this shameful data point, we have remained among the top six in the country for ensuring people experiencing homelessness are sheltered – until most recently.

Data from Chittenden County indicates that well-over 300 people report sleeping unsheltered within our community. For reference, this far-exceeds pre-pandemic levels: in 2019, Chittenden County experienced approximately 20-40 people sleeping outside. Further, and thankfully, we have not witnessed families with children or people with significant medical issues unsheltered – which leaves us ill-prepared to manage the crisis ahead in the next few weeks.

According to a recent report submitted to the legislature by AHS Department of Children and Families ([https://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Legislative-Reports/Act-113-DCF-Housing-Report-8.31.2024.pdf?\\_gl=1\\*12jgcvy\\*\\_ga\\*NDkwMTE3NjE3LjE2OTA1NTY0ODg.\\*\\_ga\\_V9WQH77KLW\\*MTcyNjI1MTE1MS4xMS4xLjE3MjYyNTI1NzEuMC4wLjA](https://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Legislative-Reports/Act-113-DCF-Housing-Report-8.31.2024.pdf?_gl=1*12jgcvy*_ga*NDkwMTE3NjE3LjE2OTA1NTY0ODg.*_ga_V9WQH77KLW*MTcyNjI1MTE1MS4xMS4xLjE3MjYyNTI1NzEuMC4wLjA)), roughly 1350 households consisting of people with significant disabilities, families with young children, people who are pregnant, and older adults will become unsheltered by October 8<sup>th</sup>.

In Chittenden County, this number includes 87 children. Our systems are not designed to respond to children sleeping in tents. Our public schools do not know how to support students who live outside or in a car. Our resources do not include mechanisms or policy to respond to the number of vulnerable people who have no other choice but to live on park benches, car lots, or the woods, because they no longer had access to shelter. In Chittenden County, this number includes people who rely on oxygen, home-health, and hospice services. Our infrastructure is not equipped to enable this level of assistance in the woods, on the waterfront, or in a vehicle. We simply lack the ability to serve Vermonters in this manner – and the effects are dire.

We must advocate for solutions, long-term planning, intentional and empathetic responses that address the root-cause of housing instability in our state. We must support our frontline workers who field phone calls and emails from desperate people with no options. The father with two disabled children

who will be unsheltered on September 19<sup>th</sup>, the 86 year old who needs to know where to find a tent, the person who relies on oxygen for survival and can't access outdoor electric outlet to maintain their medical equipment, the parent who has fled an abusive partner and has nowhere else to turn, the person who has completed residential treatment and is desperately trying to maintain sobriety, the family that has a rental assistance voucher but has been unable to fund an affordable housing unit.

The Chittenden County Homeless Alliance advocates for continuous shelter for vulnerable households. We plead for adequate funding to respond to the fall-out of failed policies.

What can you do?

- Connect with the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance and the Housing and Homelessness Alliance of Vermont to learn about and add your voice to local and statewide advocacy
- Contact your legislators and demand adequate funding for non-profits who are performing this on-the-ground work
- Attend municipal planning meetings and raise your voice for a shift in regulations which inhibit the growth of affordable housing development
- Advocate for expansion of residential treatment for mental health and substance abuse treatment options, and for transitional recovery housing options
- Talk to everyone you know about the importance of ensuring vulnerable Vermonters have access to the resources, shelter, and services they need to rebuild their lives

Above all, we ask community members to maintain collective empathy for our neighbors who are battling daily to survive. We ask for action to ensure stable, affordable, and safe housing is a human right in Vermont.

Signed:

Burlington Fire Department

Burlington Housing Authority

Cathedral Square Corporation

Champlain Housing Trust

Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity

City of Burlington

Erhard Mahnke, (retired) Sen. Bernie Sanders' Office & Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition

Housing and Homeless Alliance of Vermont

Lund

Pathways Vermont

SafeSpace Anti-Violence Program, Pride Center

Steps to End Domestic Violence

University of Vermont Health Network

United Way of Northwest Vermont

Vermont Legal Aid