

# **GENERAL ASSISTANCE PILOT PROJECT EVALUATION**

**In Accordance with H.537: ACT 65, Section 137**

Submitted to: Senator Susan Bartlett, Chair  
Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Senator Douglas Racine, Chair  
Senate Committee on Health And Welfare  
Representative Martha Heath, Chair  
House Committee on Appropriations  
Representative Ann Pugh, Chair  
House Committee on Human Services

Submitted by: Stephen R. Dale, Commissioner

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## GA REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

### **Background: Legislative Beginnings**

General Assistance/Emergency Assistance has been the program to serve people with empty pockets, those with little or no resources of their own or who have experienced emergencies and crisis which has disrupted their lives. In the belief that we could serve people in these circumstances better, more effectively and more efficiently, the 2006 Legislative Session created language to establish three pilot programs within the General Assistance program to provide more flexibility in providing benefits for the purpose of mitigating poverty and serving people more effectively.

The General Assistance / Emergency Assistance program is grant funded from multiple sources including the General fund \$2,854,939; the Global Commitment fund \$410,000; and Federal TANF funds \$1,111,320 for a total of \$4,376,259. On average, two thousand households receive a grant per month.

In response to the opportunity presented by the Legislature, the Economic Services Division within the Agency of Human Services' Department for Children and Families convened a work group of interested stakeholders from a wide arena of public and private organizations and consumers to explore the possibilities of redesigning the General Assistance (GA) program. About thirty people attended the first meeting in June, 2006 and over time, many more individuals and organizations joined as participants.

The GA work group is a richly diverse group of people from across the spectrum of statewide housing organizations, low income advocates, public and private organizations and consumers who all share an interest in making the GA program more responsive and more efficient in meeting the needs of Vermont's most vulnerable citizens. The GA work group met many times since that first meeting to examine the program issues. One of the first projects they completed was to develop a Request for Proposals (RFP) document, a budget and organize and conduct a pilot selection process. The work group worked to gather and analyze statistical data and anecdotal reports of the current state, observe the evolution of changes as they have occurred and recognize changing and emerging patterns and trends. The GA work group developed subcommittees, one to organize a Request for Proposals (RFP) process and one to examine rules and manage data collection. Both subcommittees reported back to the full Work Group frequently for feedback, guidance and direction on their work.

The RFP process produced eight proposals from the districts of: St. Albans, Burlington, St. Johnsbury, Barre, Rutland, Springfield, Bennington, and Middlebury.

Through a review and evaluative process of the eight pilot proposals, the RFP subcommittee summarized and presented recommendations to the AHS Secretary for

the selection of the GA pilots. St. Albans, Springfield and Morrisville were designated as pilots.

It turned out that although there are three “official” GA pilots, every district who submitted a proposal has benefited from the process, an observation noted by many. The very process of working collaboratively with community partners in the districts to develop housing strategies and plans and figure out together how to coordinate better their limited resources. Relationships with community partners were strengthened and in some cases where relationships had not existed before, new ones have taken root and grown.

Since all the proposals included creative ideas to serve GA recipients better and more effectively, all were given feedback, support and guidance on how to further develop their plans while remaining within GA rules and without “pilot” status. Many of them have gone on to adapt their ideas and implement innovative practices with their community partners. It became an opportunity for experimentation toward better customer service and effective and efficient program performance.

### **Introduction and Recommendations for Vermont’s General Assistance Program**

The General Assistance (GA) program is a benefits program that provides a safety net for people who are in a housing crisis. The crisis could involve people at risk of losing their housing due to being behind on their rent or mortgage (back rent benefit), or who are already homeless and need shelter (temporary housing benefit) and help to get back into permanent housing.

The program also provides ongoing housing stipends for individuals who are not in crisis but who need a small amount of economic housing assistance to keep low cost permanent housing, usually by renting a room.

Currently, the primary eligibility criteria for back rent, which is limited to families only, and temporary housing benefits is that aside from being financially destitute, you qualify only if you haven’t “caused your own housing crisis” by spending your money or behaving irresponsibly. This means that those who have caused their own housing crisis are excluded from obtaining benefits.

For those who have received benefits for temporary housing, the only requirement to keep the benefit is to make a good faith effort to find permanent housing through a self directed housing search. For those in the back rent program, the major requirement is that the landlord must agree not to evict them in exchange for up to three months of back rent.

The GA housing program has run over budget in both SFY 06 and 07. Expenditures have been particularly high in Rutland and Chittenden counties. Funding for this program has not increased in many years. The GA budget in 1997 was \$4.3 million and the GA program budget for SFY 08 is \$4.3 million. During those years, housing costs

have escalated, the housing supply has diminished, and the vacancy rate of the existing housing supply continues to drop. At the same time, the cost of energy has dramatically increased, forcing people to choose between paying for warmth or paying their rent.

Many individuals and families who have maintained stable housing over time lose housing due to a catastrophic financial crisis. This could result from losing transportation or employment, experiencing a medical crisis that overwhelms the family with debt, not having enough income to pay for increased rent and energy costs, and, underlying behaviors that result in money mismanagement and/or other dysfunctional tenant behavior.

There are significant concerns about the current GA program. One is how to stretch existing funding to go further, particularly in an environment of increased housing costs. Another is how to make sure that investment of benefits pays off in terms of outcomes such as prevention of eviction and placement into permanent housing for the long term and attaining shorter lengths of time from the date of eligibility to the date when permanent placement occurs.

In addition, the good cause exclusionary criteria means that there are a number of people who are not eligible for benefits. They become evicted, become homeless and stay homeless, resulting in cost shifts to community shelters, prisons, protective services and the like.

### **Considerations of the Future State of the GA Program**

Both pilots and studies have shown that when individuals and families are in a housing crisis, regardless of whether they caused the crisis or not, their outcomes improve when they take advantage of supportive housing services and programs. In addition, there are pilots that have used different strategies to leverage expenditures for better results for people.

For example, Economics Services funded the 'Family Partnership' pilot program at Central Vermont Community Action Council (CVCAC) to see if supportive housing services would prevent families from becoming evicted. The pilot strategies included outreach to the landlord; assessment and intensive case management for families; back rent money to prevent immediate eviction; and a requirement to sign a commitment to correct any behaviors related to eviction. The program had no good cause exclusionary criteria. An evaluation of the program revealed that 87% of all those who made commitments successfully retained their housing a year after services were either provided or completed. This is primarily a 'back rent' prevention program to prevent homelessness.

ESD should invest every possible effort in housing programs that prevent homelessness. It is far less expensive to prevent homelessness than to fund temporary housing for the homeless, provide deposits and up front rent for permanent housing, and try to diminish the length of time it takes to facilitate permanent housing placement.

Being homeless can put children at risk to go into state custody and adults at risk to return to prison because being homeless is, in some cases, grounds for some people on prison furloughs to be reincarcerated.

There are current GA pilots that are leveraging expenditures by renting apartments for temporary housing at significantly lower cost than renting rooms in motels on a short term basis.

The Rental Opportunity Center (ROC) in Burlington, administered by COTS, included an assessment of the family/individual; intensive case management and service coordination if the underlying issues required; collaboration between landlords and supportive housing services providers on behalf of the families and individuals to mitigate landlord, and, most importantly, a commitment by families and individuals to address the underlying issues that, when resolved, will sustain them in permanent housing placement or retention. The major factor reported in this effort was the intensive outreach and relationship building with local landlords who would take high risk tenants only because of the ROC program staff's credibility. This program has been de-funded but has six years' worth of outcome data showing similar results to those of the Family Partnership program run by CVCAC.

The future state of the GA housing program will be informed by the experiences of these pilots. It would require three parts: that benefit programs be coupled with supportive housing services; replace good cause criterion with an assessment to see to what extent services are needed; and an agreement to participate in these services by the family and individual in order to receive the benefits. Components should include intensive outreach to landlords both to prevent eviction and to facilitate placement into permanent housing. In addition, these services must exist and be available for this new approach to work. Capacity building is occurring in many communities but there is great variability in the depth and types of supportive housing services available.

Before offering a specific policy approach to shape the future state, the limitations of changing the GA program and its effect on the pending or existing homeless population must be discussed.

The GA program is only a piece of the housing puzzle. Although it has a statewide annual budget of \$4.3 million, it cannot, in and of itself, achieve major reductions in the homeless population through its benefits programs or by funding pilots. Even with a major change in GA policy as outlined below, the availability and capacity of supportive housing services is crucial to success. Achieving major reductions in the homeless population requires clout to bring the community and financial support together far beyond the capacity that the GA program provides.

In the area of housing and homelessness, there has been no one entity or person in charge of all that is required to fix supply and demand, integrate human services, leverage and manage all the money being spent on housing, assimilate all the data

necessary to understand all aspects of the problem and no entity charged with making policy or policy recommendations on all the issues.

The Governor has established the Vermont Interagency Homeless Council (VIHC) which is attempting to address many of the issues stated here. VIHC has many of the key decision makers in many of the areas mentioned. However, communities in Vermont vary in size, demographics, capacity, and politics. In order to really manage and move the housing and homelessness issues forward, local communities need to play a role in setting the agenda and participate in decisions such as whether to have shelters or not, understand and weigh in on what parts of a continuum of care they should have or not have, and understand that housing and homelessness is not a poverty problem but is really an economic development problem that impacts why people leave and come to Vermont to live.

One potential solution could place the AHS Field Director in a key leadership role to bring together all stakeholder parties: the community, human services, government housing players, providers and local personnel who have any spending authority and/or influence over federal and state dollars. The group would participate at the table in a housing summit, create an agenda, and map out a comprehensive plan that could link with the work of the VIHC.

The AHS Field Director, working through the Secretary of Human Services and the Secretary of Administration, could lead a process where all housing related monies and resources could be put on the table, leveraged, and applied to the problem. This kind of collaboration would create both synergy and efficiency far beyond the individual silos and entities who are attempting to manage the housing and homelessness problem separately, with some partnerships, and some overlap.

### **Recommendations for the Shorter Term to Inform the Longer Term**

There are several areas of information that are not developed enough to inform and guide a statewide policy change for GA.

1. There is a lack of data to quantify the anticipated demand of individuals and families requiring supportive housing services and benefits for back rent and temporary housing if the policy were to be changed so it does not include “cause” as the exclusionary criteria for eligibility. If we could assess the universe of those eligible, we could assess the projected expenditures for capacity of benefits and services in the new GA program.

VICH has a data subcommittee that is compiling data that currently exists. However, it appears that we have no data on people who were in some kind of housing crisis but did not apply for GA and only limited data on those who applied and were denied eligibility. The way the data is currently coded allows for the capture of only one reason for issuance or denial of the benefit. It does not capture additional information about underlying issues such as mental health, substance abuse, etc.

Further, while families with or without children are eligible for temporary housing, only families with children are eligible for back rent. There is an obvious need to assist families without children but no data is available to assess the demand for the back rent program if we expanded it to include this part of the population.

2. There is a lack of data on the totality of supportive housing services in Vermont. The VICH has a program service inventory subcommittee working on building this inventory. This has a better chance of being more accurate for planning purposes than the “demand data”. However, while capacity can be assessed and gaps identified, there also needs to be an analysis of the sustainability of these services as many are dependent on annual federal funding streams that can be unpredictable. We also need to understand if and how such services can be leveraged more effectively, coordinated to avoid duplication, what difference they are making and how they are measured against a continuum of care that involves community participation.

The three General Assistance Pilots currently underway in St. Albans, Springfield and Morrisville are evaluating the effectiveness of packaging payment of benefits with requirements to participate with supportive housing services so that families who want help to change their behavior and achieve success in obtaining and/or sustaining permanent housing can receive that help. AHS has contracted with the Vermont Research Partnership to study the efficacy of these pilots. These pilots were authorized by the legislature in the session that ended in state fiscal year 06. The evaluation strategy and time line is referenced in the Vermont Research Partnership evaluation of the GA Pilots attached to this report.

During state fiscal year 2007, the GA budget experienced extraordinary expenditures in two large population areas of the state, Rutland and Chittenden counties. These expenditures were in temporary housing in the under and over twenty-eight day categories.

It is essential that our assumptions be tested further in these large counties not only to attempt to curb the currently growing expenditure levels but to give us more complete information on whether the direction we are going is a more effective one for all of Vermont over the longer term.

Accordingly, we will request authorization for two more GA pilots for Rutland and Chittenden counties. We will ask these pilots to propose a way to include families or individuals without children in the back rent program as we know keeping them in their existing housing will prevent spending more money later to find them permanent housing if they become homeless. Many temporary housing dollars are spent on individuals once they become homeless.

We will ask these pilot districts for proposals that include an integrated approach to providing services as described in the Rental Opportunity Center that once existed in

Burlington. We will ask that these pilot proposals assess the supportive services in their respective areas to avoid duplication, seek out opportunities to leverage dollars and combine services where possible among the housing provider networks. We will ask for strategies that spend current dollars for temporary housing more effectively through strategies such as renting apartments for transitional or temporary housing instead of paying for costly motel nights on a night by night basis, which is the most expensive approach. We have requested to remove the spending cap for over 28 days through the Budget Adjustment Act.

If we are successful in obtaining authorization to move forward with two more GA pilots, five of the twelve AHS districts will be able to evaluate their experiences and inform us about best practices, costs and changes that will be needed in statewide GA policy for the longer term.

### **Three GA Pilots: Current Status and Accomplishments**

The pilot districts have continued to grow and develop and report on their progress to the GA work group. August reports revealed significant progress as they move toward full implementation. Pilots are growing and in different stages of development; they are learning from their own experiences and from those of each other.

#### Springfield

The Springfield GA Pilot officially began July 1 and contracted with the Springfield Family Center to serve as fiscal agent and tenant to rent four apartments and to provide case management services for GA recipients who agree to participate in the pilot program. Their experiment with alternative temporary housing rather than placing people into motels for up to 84 days is proving to be better for individuals and families and more cost effective for the GA program.

By the end of August, the Springfield District Office was no longer using motels for temporary housing. And by the end of August, 30 households had been referred to the pilot whereas in the past, four people had been served in the same time frame. District staff reported that there were many more homeless people in the Springfield area than anticipated. Growth in pilot program participation has continued. By the end of November, 67 households had been referred compared to the 13 households that would have received temporary housing assistance under GA rules in an average year in the past. In the pilot, anyone who is homeless, regardless of how they came to be homeless, can be served. This is different from current GA rules that exclude people who are perceived to have caused their homelessness.

“Case management is the critical piece,” says District Director Cathy Kratz, because case managers and program participants enter into an individualized service plan

contract with a plan to move into permanent housing within 90 days. It is through case management that Springfield hopes to change behavior patterns for a population that has difficulty moving out of undesirable conditions. Over the years, simply paying to move someone into a new environment did not seem to resolve the housing issues in the caseload. Within a short time, sometimes within a few months, Springfield staff would see many of the same people getting into the same situations. The pilot is set up to develop personal responsibility, investment, and self reliance. There are immediate consequences for non-compliance, and both immediate and long term rewards for cooperation.

The partners worked together to develop the pilot program as they went. It has been a learning experience for all involved. They found that many homeless people are transitory and don't want to change their lifestyle. Some people would not engage in supportive services and case management. However, through their collaborative efforts, the pilot has achieved some great successes. Some of the stories are remarkable and demonstrate changes in social behaviors since the people began participation in the pilot.

One example is a chronically homeless woman with long term substance abuse issues who was placed into affordable and suitable permanent housing. She continues to do well, is in good standing with her new landlord and is receiving treatment for the substance abuse. This is a dramatic change in her life because before she entered the GA pilot program, none of the area landlords would ever consider renting to her.

In another example, many of the women in the pilot are victims of domestic violence. The pilot provides a safe environment within the structure of the program where there are frequent visits by the pilot housing case manager. When an offending batterer seeks to reunite with the victim, as they often do, it is the GA pilot program rule which prohibits overnight guests from staying in the pilot housing units, that helps the victim maintain needed and desired separation from the batterer. On the other hand, if both parties want and are willing to work on a permanent reunification plan, they may do so under the supervision of the case manager. We have experienced one such situation and part of the amended contractual agreement was that the couple obtained marital counseling.

A third example is that four babies were born to mothers participating in the Pilot; four mothers and four babies who would have otherwise been homeless.

The economics of the Springfield Pilot are based on client participation, using non-traditional temporary housing, and supports from sources outside of Economic Services. There is strong support for reciprocity that includes the individual seeking assistance paying a reasonable share of the expense. The way Springfield traditionally paid for the cost of temporary housing in the GA program had proven to be expensive at \$99 per night at the local motel. The four furnished Pilot rental units (including all utilities) used in the Springfield GA Pilot cost \$3250 per month for all four. The cost for the same temporary housing capacity at the motel is \$11,880 per month. In addition to housing costs, there is the cost of personnel (Pilot housing case managers). These costs are

partially off-set by client contribution to the program. Funding sources are from OEO, Economic Services, and program participants.

Monthly Cost and Funding – Using 12/07 as an example

4 Pilot units Rents&Elec.	GA\$ spent on TempHousing	Participant Payments	Participant Escrow savings = \$962.52 saved for security deposits by participants
<u>\$3,250</u>	<u>\$1,174.96</u>	<u>\$1,925.04</u>	
CM salary & expenses	Funding OEO	Funding ESD grant	OEO funding – Match money for Security Deposits = \$1,000 available aver. per month
<u>\$2,571</u>	<u>\$1,152.75</u>	<u>\$623.08</u>	In kind supports available aver. per month from Community Action & Springfield Family Center = Security Deposits - \$807 Furniture - \$333 Food - \$800

The pilot temporary housing piece of the Springfield GA Pilot is funded by participant contribution and General assistance payments at the local district office.

The pilot case management piece of the Springfield GA Pilot is currently funded by Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and Economic Services. Housing case managers are also funded by other departments for services with their particular populations. Springfield has been able to piggy back the pilot case management onto the other programs because they are serving the populations of those funders.

Part of the reason the overall GA cost for both temporary and permanent housing from Springfield has been kept low is that these expenses have been offset by pilot participants paying 50% of their income towards temporary housing and saving 25% of their income in an escrow account to be released and used towards their permanent housing. Another financial support is the “match” money that OEO has made available for security deposits. This is a generous allowance that will pay up to the needed amount over and above the escrowed amount. In addition, there are financial supports from other agencies including Community Action and the Springfield Family Center for pilot participants. These security deposits and first month’s rent would have been paid out of General Assistance funds for qualifying individuals in “pre-Pilot” times. Traditionally the GA clients did not, or were not able to save money towards future expenses, so Economic Services bore the whole financial burden. In the Pilot, the participants quickly learn how to budget and save money for their current temporary housing expense, and the anticipated move to permanent housing. Only by this methodology and process has the Springfield office been able to serve as many people as have come into the pilot and keep close to budget.

Below, are figures extrapolated from statistics kept on GA expenditures from Economic Services.

	July 06-June 07 <u>Average \$/month</u>	July 06-Sept 07 <u>Average \$/month</u>
Temp Housing <28 days	\$875.33	\$895
Temp Housing >28 days	\$414.83	\$170.33
All Temp. Housing combined	\$1,290.16	\$1,065.33

Though it is too early to draw conclusions, it appears Springfield is spending less money directly on temporary housing. However these figures do not take into consideration the cost of the salaries of the Housing case manager. Nor do these figures take into consideration that they are now offering services to as many people per month that they had served in a whole year prior to starting the Pilot. That is over twelve times more service delivery. They are spending less per individual and providing services that have long range impact.

Springfield data collection is getting better. January's statewide point-in-time homeless count for a specific date was 144 for Springfield. Point-in-time numbers appeared to be low but there appeared to be a high number of homeless youth in the area who are couch-surfing. District office staff track the GA pilot's savings achievements by documenting referrals, participation and follow up in an Excel spreadsheet. District staff like that the pilot is helping a lot of people get into permanent, long term housing solutions.

Pilot case managers plan to do longer term follow up on an as-needed basis which may create an added caseload for these case managers.

Springfield's GA pilot sees emerging challenges. It has become clear that in just five months, the numbers of people needing housing is much greater than anticipated or previously recognized. Springfield has experienced a huge increase to their service delivery system. They have found that working differently with people requires increased staff time. They have seen increasing pressures on the community housing environment. One large housing complex has safety issues and another has tightened its rules, resulting in increasing numbers of evictions.

Springfield's GA pilot has produced learning opportunities and early recommendations among the partners. Primary is that it is important to preserve existing housing – and landlord-tenant relationships - because doing so is less disruptive for individuals and families and more economical for the GA program. It is important to address problems early before the situation becomes unsalvageable. One way to do this is to look at current household bills at case review to identify the people having financial trouble. One recommendation is to change GA rules to allow GA to pay all or part of a back bill where it would be effective, i.e. result in the person remaining in adequate housing. In some cases, it is appropriate to prevent loss of housing by helping to pay a utility bill. The pilot has advocated for more public guardians to help people on SSI and with disabilities to manage their money.

Springfield has given individuals and families a role to play in finding temporary and/or permanent housing and for some, created accountability to fix situations they have created.

### Morrisville

The Morrisville GA Pilot has been underway since December 2006. The intent of the Morrisville GA Pilot has been to focus on the underlying issues that cause some people to remain on GA for long duration and to break the cycle of poverty, not only for those who have been on GA for a long time, but to identify those who, without supports, will likely experience a long tenure of poverty and program eligibility. This has been accomplished by providing intensive service coordination to 24 unduplicated households over the last year at a benefits savings of \$17,154 for the twelve month period. These savings were achieved by moving six of these individuals off the GA program and into more self sufficient situations.

Morrisville District subcontracted with Central Vermont Community Action Council (CVCAC) for full-time Service Coordinator services to assist the GA Pilot. Additionally, CVCAC's Family Housing Support Worker has worked closely with the Service Coordinator and the AHS Field Director to access LIFT funds that assist the working poor to prevent them from sliding deeper into poverty. Monthly oversight meetings occurred to make sure the pilot was as effective as possible, to ensure that progress was being made and to identify program concerns at the earliest stages. Participants in the monthly reviews included the AHS Field Director, DCF Economic Services supervisors, Morrisville's CVCAC Director and the Service Coordinator.

To more effectively manage and serve the group of long term ongoing GA recipients who return monthly for assistance for more than six months, Morrisville's pilot applied a new approach. Many were people with disabilities so the pilot arranged with DAIL's Vocational Rehabilitation Division to assess the individuals and assist those who might qualify to gather the supporting documentation and apply for Social Security (SSI) benefits. Sixteen GA recipients were referred for help with the SSI application process. Nine appeared to be potentially eligible, have processed applications and are receiving service coordination services. Some have been awarded SSI and are no longer receiving GA benefits. Protocols for referrals have been established and while the caseload has averaged fifteen participants, it is expected to grow to twenty active cases.

The pilot provides housing supports that help stabilize living situations for people. The Morrisville District created the Landlord Insurance Fund for Tenants (LIFT) to pay security deposits and other housing related costs to help people move into permanent housing. Over a year ago, the fund was capitalized with private and public contributions. To date, 30 individuals have been provided \$15,000 in assistance to pay their security deposit with landlords to help them access rental housing. Not all of the 30 individuals were on GA when they received assistance through LIFT, but clearly without assistance they could have ended up on GA. A key element of LIFT is reciprocity. LIFT is sustainable and should be replenished and available to serve another 30 people next

year as the people who received assistance this year have agreed to assign their anticipated income tax return to pay the fund back. Seventy-seven percent of the funds that were provided in 2006-2007 have been paid back, helping to keep the fund going in perpetuity.

In the year that it has been operating, the Morrisville pilot has been cautious about issuing exceptions to the GA rules. Five exceptions were granted in the past twelve months. The intent was to grant exceptions only when it was clear that without the exception; more state funds would likely be spent. For example, one individual received assistance at the Brattleboro Retreat Detox Program, and was transferred to Valley Vista, but when it came time to be discharged to the Maple Leaf Treatment Program, there was no bed available. The only option for the person was to go back to old friends and habits he had worked so hard to break dependency from. Instead of risking relapse for the individual and losing the Medicaid investments that had been made on his behalf, an exception was made to grant GA and house the individual at a local motel for two days until the bed at Maple Leaf became available. Other areas of savings, while difficult to track, include prevention of children coming into state custody for lack of housing; enrollment in Choices for Care program; receiving SSI benefits and reduced / prevention of involvement with the Department of Corrections.

Although a great deal of work was done to develop a transitional housing site, this element of the Morrisville pilot has not yet materialized. With the help of a philanthropic landlord and the DOC work crew, an abandoned house was refurbished. The house was to be named after the landlord's mother who worked in Morrisville's human services community for many years. The only costs to the community were to be property taxes and heat, as no rent would be charged. Instead of housing people in local motels at a cost of \$70 per night, a transitional apartment offers much more for just \$15 per night. Ongoing operating costs for the apartment would be covered through United Way funds and the AHS Field Director's Direct Service Funds instead of with GA funds. Unfortunately, zoning issues emerged and neighbors resisted efforts for this use of the property so the plan was withdrawn. In 2008, Morrisville's pilot staff will work to identify another transitional apartment as part of their pilot.

Emerging challenges for the Morrisville GA pilot include how to fund the service coordinator/ case manager position after the pilot; and how to manage caseload levels as long term follow up needs become evident.

For the Morrisville pilot, the big benefit is the flexibility and authority to make exceptions because flexibility and creativity make it work.

The St. Albans GA pilot is just becoming operational after the recent hiring of a housing specialist. This is a supportive housing pilot to serve families and individuals who are homeless, are at risk for becoming homeless, have demonstrated difficulty in maintaining permanent housing or face barriers that will impede their success in maintaining permanent housing. CVOEO serves as fiscal agent and tenant for two transitional apartments in St. Albans and the surrounding area. People can stay in the apartments for up to five months and then move to permanent housing. A case manager provides case management services for up to fifteen individuals or families in the first year. An FTE Housing Specialist works with other individuals and families beyond those residing in the transitional apartments who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

The goals are for the pilot to decrease the amount of GA expenditures for temporary housing, EA Back Rent and security deposits and increase the capacity of transitional apartments in Franklin/Grand Isle Counties. The St. Albans staff is recommending that a common data set for all three pilots be created to establish a baseline of information.

The St. Albans GA pilot is designed to include specific features. The pilot will assess people involved with the program and develop a coordinated service plan that centers on housing goals. Team meetings with providers working with individuals and families will determine the role and responsibilities needed to meet individual/family goals with an emphasis on housing stability and outreach to landlords. The pilot will address financial literacy, assist with housing search and make referrals to community service providers. Participants will be assisted in developing a stable income source if one doesn't exist. This could be through employment or eligibility for state/federal programs. Franklin Grand Isle Housing Solutions will screen referrals, provide consultations and develop other resources. Reciprocity is part of this pilot through tenant contributions to transitional housing costs based on their income and expenses.

The pilot will make exceptions to GA eligibility rules. Whether the individual or family caused their homelessness does not exclude them from eligibility for participation. The eligibility requirement to meet the definition of a catastrophic situation is waived for individuals/families accepted into the supportive housing program, allowing people who have no previous landlord tenant relationship, non-constructive evictions, couch surfing, etc. to participate in the pilot program.

## **SUMMARY OF LEARNINGS**

While the General Assistance / Emergency Assistance program provides many financial benefits for those who are eligible, the most money is spent on housing whether it is paying back rent to sustain existing housing or paying for temporary or transitional housing while the family finds new housing. Housing benefits made up 86 % of all GA/EA dollars spent in SFY 07. At a time when housing across Vermont's communities is becoming more and more expensive, the available housing stock is

shrinking and people's incomes are not keeping up with housing costs. More people are being thrown into housing crisis.

### **Affordable, Available Housing in Vermont**

According to the 2007 update of "Between a Rock and a Hard Place Housing and Wages in Vermont" report published by the Vermont Housing Council and the Vermont Housing Awareness Campaign, the 2007 housing wage to afford fair market rent in the state is \$15.34 per hour or \$31,897 annually. This is the amount people working 40 hours per week must earn to afford available housing. The report goes on to say that "at least 59 percent of Vermont's non-farm employees – more than 163,000 people - work in occupations with median wages below that level." The draft report of the Vermont Interagency Council on Homelessness projects that the 2008 housing wage will be \$16.07 per hour. Clearly, housing costs consume an ever-increasing amount of available income for Vermonters.

In addition, "Beyond a Rock and a Hard Place" says that "Vermont had the tightest housing market in the nation in 2006. The rental vacancy rate was 4.4 percent and the most recent housing needs assessment showed Vermont has a shortage of 21,000 affordable rental units." Available, affordable housing is in insufficient supply for Vermonters, creating a real housing crisis for many families.

### **Costs**

The choice of placing people who are suddenly and unexpectedly without housing into motels is one of the most expensive strategies for helping people in need. We have learned that putting people into apartments on a short term basis is much more cost effective with monthly cost comparisons of \$812.50 for a rental apartment versus \$2,700 for motel nights and is more conducive to family living and their overall stability (Springfield data used in example). Working to place homeless people into transitional rental housing apartments instead of paying for motel nights is something ESD districts could do without GA pilot status by using budgeted monies differently.

It is recognized that the state cannot be the tenant of record for apartments. DCF needs a private or public sector partner who can be the tenant and supervisor for temporary housing placements. This model requires outreach to collaborate, develop and sustain effective working relationships with landlords. A program such as Burlington's Rental Opportunity Center (ROC) which operated a few years ago, worked very effectively with area landlords to place people needing housing into available apartments and provide supportive case management to ensure lasting occupancy. ROC maintained a housing inventory and developed strong relationships and credibility with landlords to follow through; these were the critical links to their success. Because of lack of ongoing financial assistance, the program was discontinued; with adequate funding, a similar model could be replicated in Burlington and other large communities to serve the growing need.

## Emerging Issues

A recent phenomenon was identified in the two largest cities, Burlington and Rutland. Economic Services Division offices experienced the arrivals by taxi, often at the end of the day, of people who were being released from area hospitals with no where to go. Area nursing home beds, community care spaces and friends and family were not available to them. Some people who are not covered by Medicaid are not candidates to stay at a shelter because they use IV medications, have insulin or other medication that needs refrigeration, are incontinent, or have mental health issues. There are no alternatives places for them.

Specialized populations require specialized assistance to obtain housing but they are in competition with many others for the limited available housing. People with mental health issues who qualify for housing assistance through mental health agencies must hold a mental health designation of being eligible for Community Rehabilitation and Treatment (CRT). According to Brian Smith, there are only 3100 people in the state who meet that designation. There is a much larger group of people who have emotional health needs and also need housing assistance. One response is to train people to help with money mismanagement and learn about the Shelter Plus Care housing certificates. In addition, substance abuse is one of the largest issues that get people out of housing. It is uncertain how many people have mental health and substance abuse issues combined. Addressing these issues will make a difference in the numbers of homeless people.

The expenditures of GA money on temporary housing related to people in the Burlington District over the past two years with mental health issues is dwarfed by the numbers of people having domestic violence issues, cites Tony Morgan (Office of Economic Opportunity) who further states that national statistics report 40% of people who are homeless have experienced domestic violence that caused them to lose their housing. In Vermont, many communities have no domestic violence shelters to assist women and children in these situations. However, sending them to temporary housing at area motels creates greater vulnerability to predators and their abusers who search for them, especially if the locations of the motels become known.

The Vermont State Housing Authority reported that 54% of applicants issued housing vouchers within the last year self reported domestic violence backgrounds. The Housing Authority closed their waiting list at the end of October 2007 because the waiting list is now five years out and not moving, something they have not done since 1984 (when it was closed for 13 months).

Today's evicted person will become tomorrow's homeless person has been demonstrated repeatedly. This consequence clearly supports having a back rent program and preventive, supportive services that help sustain the individual or family's stability by sustaining their existing housing. Once housing is lost, all other aspects of people's lives are thrown into crisis and turmoil until permanent, affordable housing is reestablished.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The GA work group recommends changing the GA program from a benefits program to a benefits and services program including a supportive housing program and case management services to help people in crisis regardless of how they came to be in crisis.
- The GA work group recommends reinstating / replicating the Rental Opportunity Center program as a model with a proven record that works to help people find and sustain permanent housing, especially people who are households without children or part of medical subpopulations. The work group recognizes that this program cannot be revenue neutral and therefore recommends funding of \$200,000.
- The GA work group recommends by consensus maintaining the 84 day maximum and removing the money cap of \$150,000 on 84 days.
- The GA work group recommends adding two new pilot districts in Burlington and Rutland and providing some funding within the GA housing budget. Pilots would include an analysis of whether expanding back rent program could be done budget neutral.
- The GA work group discussed the importance of expanding the back rent program for families without children
- The Morrisville Pilot has been so successful with helping long term GA recipients in the application process for SSI that DCF will immediately implement a statewide project in partnership with the Division Of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) to help GA recipients with potential disabilities. VR staff will assess GA recipients for possible SSI consideration. Three part time staff will be hired by VR to facilitate the application process for those identified as appropriate candidates. GA recipients will be expected to participate fully in the SSI application process as a condition for receiving GA benefits. The project will start in January.
- The Springfield GA pilot recommends changing GA rules to allow GA to pay all or part of a back bill where it would be effective in keeping the family in existing housing. For example, in some cases, it is appropriate to prevent loss of housing by helping to pay a utility bill.

## **INDEPENDENT EVALUATION**

The Vermont Research Partners including Monika Baege, EdD, H. Bud Meyers, PhD, and Cheryl Mitchell, PhD, were contracted to perform an independent evaluation of the first year's progress for GA Pilots established by the Legislature. The Partners conducted on-site interviews looking at six general areas including guiding frameworks for success, outcomes, what kind of data to keep, external collaboration, cost neutrality, existing data and ideas for kinds of data that should be there.

Early observations recognized that GA pilots allow people to ask questions to get more information and provide more flexibility. Case management allows relationships to be developed. Chronic GA users are very isolated and unaware of what kinds of programs and services are available to help them. SSI may offer a door of opportunity for ongoing GA participants, although those actively abusing substances are not SSI eligible. Pilots are the intermediary vehicle that connects ongoing GA participants to Vocational Rehabilitation for assistance in completing SSI applications with the potential to obtain permanent income if eligible.

Vermont Research Partnership's GA Pilot Evaluation Report, Phase I is included as Attachment A.