

Memorandum

To: Doug Racine and Angus Chaney, Vermont Agency of Human Services

From: Gus Seelig, Polly Nichol and Rick DeAngelis, VHCB

Cc: Kenn Sassorossi, Connie Snow, Chris Hart, Paul Dettman, Maura Collins, Sarah Carpenter, Brenda Torpy, Michael Monte, Kathy Berk, Richard Williams, and Eileen Peltier

Date: August 2, 2013

Re: Affordable Housing Strategies for Homeless and Vulnerable Households

Recently, VHCB convened a number of affordable housing providers met to discuss the role of affordable housing providers in addressing homelessness and to identify key program elements to effectively address the housing needs of the homeless and those at-risk of homelessness. The group also considered how Vermont might move to a statewide approach at an impactful scale of housing and services for the homeless and those at-risk of homelessness.

Five major elements or strategies were identified by the group:

1. Do more to keep vulnerable families in good quality, affordable, and permanent housing. Each year, many families who already have good housing with rental assistance lose it due to evictions for non-payment and other causes. This increases the number of homeless families in crisis, and adds to the barriers they face in becoming re-housed. Prevention will be our best and most cost effective strategy.
2. Match high quality case management support with affordable housing on an as-needed basis. For the success of the neediest families, case management needs to be available for two years or longer. The most successful housing outcomes are when case managers make home visits and have reasonable caseloads. Case management lasting for one year has not been sufficient.
3. Utilize affordable housing as a platform for needed services. Housing managers are in an advantageous position to identify early warning signs of problems and to coordinate with service providers to address the individual's needs. Several programs (SASH, FSS, HASS, homeless transitional housing grants, and Transitions) already use this approach successfully.
4. More direct communication between AHS and housing providers (both local and state) is needed to develop opportunities for vulnerable populations in affordable housing. The opportunities may include available units or buildings, rental assistance, or advantageous partnerships.

5. Reliable data that describe the characteristics and needs of the most vulnerable households is needed to plan housing and support service strategies. At the current time, we do not have reliable information describing the number of homeless individuals and families in the state, the “recidivism” rate of those experiencing homelessness, or the reasons for becoming homeless.

The Family Supportive Housing Demonstration Program RFP recently issued by the Agency of Human Services and targeted to Burlington, Rutland and Brattleboro is a good example of providing long term services for at least two years, provided mainly in the home. But, without the other four elements to support those services, there remains a real question of how different this model will be from the status quo. We suggest that future iterations of the program be revised to more fully incorporate all five elements.

Furthermore, the group also suggests that representatives of the AHS meet with housing leaders to discuss options for an expanded response to homelessness that incorporate the basic elements discussed above. This discussion would examine models of joining affordable housing with supportive services that are successful in assisting homeless families and consider how to replicate or expand them.

An example of a Vermont program of affordable housing and service coordination which is successful in assisting homeless families is the Brattleboro Housing Authority’s “Transitions to Housing Program”. This program includes each of the five elements that we highlighted above. The position and leadership role of the BHA in “Transitions” is essential in insuring effective coordination and accountability between the families, the service providers and the BHA. We think this is an approach that could be expanded or replicated elsewhere to assist more homeless and those at-risk of homelessness.

Obviously, this is a challenging time for developing resources for new initiatives. However, it has been demonstrated in Connecticut, North Carolina, and other states, that investments in service-supported affordable housing can be effective in meeting human needs and reducing public expenditures overall.