

The Agency of Human Services
Department for Children and Families
THE OFFICE OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
Position Paper on Warming Shelters
July, 2014

Introduction and Background

The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) has a mission to permanently house people experiencing homelessness and to keep people safe and respectfully sheltered in emergency and short-term situations. Safe and respectful emergency shelters and permanent housing options should be seen as mutually reinforcing when part of a coordinated system of care that is based on shared values, shared accountability and a shared mission. Emergency shelters and transitional housing should be seen as important steps to engage and support people until people can be appropriately matched to permanent housing.

Warming shelters have become part of Vermont's emergency shelter system while being regarded as a less expensive alternative to motels.¹ OEO supports welcoming, safe and respectful warming shelters which include engagement and support services where the need is demonstrated and the resources available. This position is consistent with other state planning documents² along with the Vermont State Legislature's allotted funding for seasonal shelters for the 2015 State Fiscal Year. Support for warming shelters, however, is framed and limited by OEO's available resources and funding priorities which include the adequate funding and support to preserve the existing emergency shelter capacity along with preserving existing and effective transitional housing and permanent housing programs.

Purpose of Warming Shelters

1. To provide safe and respectful seasonal³ emergency shelter capacity when year-round shelters are near or at capacity and when there are insufficient transitional and permanent housing options.
2. To provide a first step to screen, engage and place people into more permanent housing.
3. To provide low barrier access for those who might be resistant to more formal housing or shelter settings.

¹ The Vermont Council on Homelessness/ Continuum of Care Planning Cold Weather Planning (2013);

² State of Vermont's Consolidated Plan (2010 to 2014); Key AHS Housing Measures (2014); The Vermont Council on Homelessness/ Continuum of Care Planning Cold Weather Planning (2013); DCF/AHS Guidance for Community Organizations requesting DCF funding to expand Seasonal Shelter Capacity, 2012/2013; OEO as part of its current Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) Request For Proposal included the use of funding for seasonal shelters.

³ November – April, or shorter.

4. To provide lower cost, community based access to shelter and services as an alternative to more expensive and disconnected motel stays.

Note: Typical warming shelter models (e.g., congregate beds, low barrier) are not considered appropriate for families with children.

General Criteria for Funding Warming Shelters

OEO will consider funding warming shelters if the following criteria are met:

1. There is data that demonstrates a need for a warming shelter. The data analysis should include an understanding of subpopulations or who would be served by a warming shelter.
2. The plan for a warming shelter fits into its coordinated system to permanently house people experiencing homelessness. This coordinated system includes a continuity of care plan to assist people when the warming shelter is closed during the day. This local planning is best done through the local Continuum of Care group and includes many community partners.
3. There are resources, expertise, and partnerships in place to implement a warming shelter that provides a welcoming, clean, safe and respectful environment that includes screening, engagement and referral services to help people get into permanent housing as quickly as possible.
4. There is a training plan in place for volunteers and staff to provide them with the basic information and advanced training on topics such as safety, de-escalation, principles of engagement, strength-based communication, screening and an introduction to mental health, substance abuse and trauma informed care.
5. The warming shelter meets and reports on the Emergency Shelter Grant (ESG) performance measures.⁴
6. The shelter agrees to comply with state and/or federal funding requirements and to be monitored by OEO as a condition of state funding.
7. The applicant is a Vermont municipality or 501(c) (3) non-profit based in the State of Vermont with municipal approval.

⁴ OEO-ESG 2014 RFP Performance Measures for Emergency Shelters

To shelter homeless households in safe and clean emergency facilities: Grantees will maintain shelter facilities that are staffed, insured, clear of safety violations; Providers will be paid on a pro-rata basis for the nights in the period that facilities are available to shelter the homeless AND meet the above conditions;; At least 90% of homeless households entering the shelter meet with a case manager or program equivalent within 3 days of shelter entry. (This can be accomplished through a referral partnership); To establish baseline data, Grantee will report on the number of new shelter residents, the number of residents exiting the program, and the average length of stay.

Note: Additional criteria are described in the ESG notice of funding or separate warming shelter RFPs.

Conclusion

OEO supports warming shelters when there is support from multiple community partners, when coordinated planning takes place through the local Continuum of Care, when there is sufficient experience and capacity in place to manage projects, when there is a demonstrated need and when services to meet immediate needs and exit people into permanent housing are integrated into the work of the shelter. OEO considers the need for warming shelters through a lens of limited resources which includes an existing shelter and housing network that is currently underfunded.

OEO considers permanent housing and emergency shelters as compatible and mutually reinforcing as long as the community has a coordinated system of care based on shared values, accountability and mission that are arrived at through open dialogue and strategic planning.