



# **Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness Strategic Plan**

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## Executive Summary

The Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness (VCEH) is comprised of a broad array of stakeholders in the homelessness and housing systems of care statewide. First formed in the early 1990s, VCEH's mission has been to end homelessness in Vermont. In January 2018, the coalition began to develop a new five-year strategic plan. With the help of consultant Greg Hessel, interviews were conducted with the coalition members, coalitions in other states and key stakeholders in the community. Additionally, a survey was designed and administered to coalition members.

Vermont's Point-In-Time count recorded 1,291 homeless people in January of 2018. The state estimates that it would take \$331 million over the next five years to build the affordable housing needed to eliminate homelessness in Vermont. Yet, state and federal funding to respond to this crisis has been, and is expected to remain, insufficient to meet the demand. In addition to a lack of housing stock and insufficient federal and state resources, the external environment is characterized by increased income inequality and more families with complex needs entering the system.

Data analysis showed that a key strength of VCEH is that it has a grass roots network that understands the community and its needs. Its most significant weakness is income restraints limiting staffing and bandwidth. The coalition spent a day in May 2018 discussing the data and working to synthesize it into a strategy for the next five years. The outcome of that day was a consensus that the focus for the next five years should be to build a more robust organizational infrastructure, leverage the grassroots network to increase advocacy, and increase support for local Continuum of Care (CoC) groups to increase their impact. The specific strategic objectives agreed to at the retreat are to:

### **Increase support for local CoCs to amplify their impact**

1. Increase TA and other support for CoCs
2. Increase supportive services available
3. Access and increase sector participation at each local CoC

### **Leverage the grass roots network of VCEH to increase advocacy capacity for services and funding**

### **Build organizational infrastructure to increase the organization's impact**

4. Explore ways to raise funds to expand staffing and capacity
5. Increased analysis of HMIS data to determine and promote what works
6. Improve the use of technology and meeting space
7. Improve the onboarding process for members and chairs
8. Improve committee effectiveness

An [action plan](#) to achieve these objectives was developed and is included in this document.

## Introduction

The Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness (VCEH) is comprised of a broad array of stakeholders in the homelessness and housing systems of care statewide. First formed in the early 1990s, VCEH's mission has been to end homelessness in Vermont through sharing information, developing resources, providing a forum for decision-making and to promote decent, safe, fair, affordable shelter for all.

VCEH is the planning and governing body for the HUD-recognized Balance of State Continuum of Care (CoC), which applies for and receives about \$4 million annually in competitive HUD homelessness funding. As such, VCEH must fulfill an array of HUD-mandated responsibilities in a manner that is inclusive, transparent and timely. The Balance of State CoC covers all of Vermont except Chittenden County. VCEH has broad stakeholder representation and meets monthly. Due to the volunteer nature of the board representation on VCEH, representatives often have limited capacity to fulfill VCEH responsibilities. VCEH does not have nonprofit status.

In addition to being the governing body of the Balance of State CoC, VCEH carries out activities through the work of committees and 11 local CoCs that fall under the Balance of State CoC. These activities include homeless youth and veteran-focused work, legislative advocacy, creation of a streamlined system for access to housing resources and supportive services and local technical assistance.

VCEH and its members partner with a broad variety of statewide stakeholders, including the Vermont Agency of Human Services and its numerous subdivisions, Vermont State Housing Authority, Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development and the Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition.

Given VCEH's broad array of activities; changing national, state, and regional dynamics; increased capacity with the creation of a CoC Support Specialist role; and the diverse stakeholders that are involved in and can benefit from VCEH's work; in the early winter of 2018 the organization deemed that the time was right to move forward with the creation of a strategic plan.

VCEH contracted with Greg Hessel of ReGeneration Resources in the winter of 2018 to assist the group with a strategic planning process. The desired primary outcomes of the engagement were to:

- Gain clarity on VCEH's identity, purpose and the outcomes the organization is trying to achieve
- Identify a few high-level strategic priorities for the next five years
- Review the mission and vision of the coalition

VCEH also wanted to:

- Gain clarity on VCEH's decision-making structure
- Improve the coalition's change management abilities
- Identify a path to address funding gaps and infrastructure needs

## Methodology

In order to help create a new strategic plan, Greg Hessel met with VCEH's Strategic Planning Committee; read background material; conducted over 20 one-on-one phone interviews with coalition members and five interviews with coalitions in other states; and designed, distributed and analyzed a survey to all

coalition members, which 96 members took. These interviews, surveys and background reading explored:

- Desired outcomes from the strategic planning process
- Current key issues for the coalition to address
- Data that might be needed for the planning project
- What coalition members most value from VCEH membership
- Coalition strengths
- What differentiates VCEH from others doing similar work
- Coalition weaknesses
- Levels of engagement in the coalition
- Coalition culture
- Concerns for the future
- Sustainability and finances

Data from all the above-mentioned sources was then synthesized, analyzed and presented in a six-hour board retreat in May of 2018<sup>1</sup>. The key outcome of this retreat was a clear strategic focus for the next five years.

## The External Environment

Vermont's most recent Point-in-Time count, conducted in January 2018, identified 1,291 homeless people in Vermont. This represents a 17 percent increase from 2016 but a 16 percent decrease from 2015, when the number reached 1,523. Additionally, in 2018 only six percent of those counted were staying in unsheltered locations, the lowest percentage in eight years.

A December 2016 study estimated that it would take 360 additional units of supportive housing and 1,250 new units of affordable housing over the next five years for Vermont to eliminate homelessness.<sup>2</sup> The estimated cost of these new units was \$331 million or \$66 million per year<sup>3</sup>. The investment of state and federal resources to meet this need has been, and is predicted to remain, insufficient. Additionally, there is a general lack of affordable housing stock in Vermont, and the increase in complexity of families needing services has led many landlords to take their units off the rental market, further diminishing the available stock. A complete listing of the themes in the external environment is included in the table on the following page.

## The Coalition Retreat

### Mission and Vision

At the retreat, the group agreed upon the role that VCEH should play in ending homelessness. This led to the creation of a new mission and vision statement. The new combined mission and vision statement of VCEH is: The VCEH supports the work of local CoCs; connects them to a broader network of stakeholders; administers federal

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<sup>1</sup> A summary of the data is contained in the SWOT analysis below.

<sup>2</sup> Vermont Roadmap to End Homelessness, page 7.

<sup>3</sup> Vermont Roadmap to End Homelessness, page 18.

funds; and advocates for funding and policy changes so that people living in Vermont have a safe, stable, affordable home and if homelessness occurs it is a brief and rare occurrence during which everyone is treated with dignity and respect

**Opportunities and Threats—the world you operate in**

From interviews conducted, the following list of opportunities and threats was generated. Opportunities and threats are defined as significant changes in the environment that the organization should consider in forming its strategic direction. (Prioritized items listed in bold).

Opportunities and Threats (things to respond to in the environment)	
1.	<b>Increase in income inequality (20)</b>
2.	<b>More complex families seeking services (14)</b>
3.	<b>Shortage of case managers (13)</b>
4.	<b>General lack of housing stock (12)</b>
5.	<b>Insufficient federal and state resources (12)</b>
6.	Lack of rental assistance -7
7.	Lack of landlord buy-in -7
8.	Increase in drug use and opioids -7
9.	An aging population in VT -5
10.	A lack of employability and employment support -4
11.	Increased focus on accountability -3
12.	External access to strong T.A. -1
13.	Increasing medical costs

**Strengths and Weaknesses—the world you control**

From interviews conducted, the following list of internal strengths and weaknesses was generated. (Prioritized items listed in bold).

Strengths	Weaknesses
1. <b>Strength in numbers—grass roots (14)</b>	1. <b>Income constraints limiting capacity and bandwidth (30)</b>
2. <b>Understanding of community needs (12)</b>	2. <b>HMIS (and other) data is not used to better inform decisions or used yet in other meaning ways (19)</b>
3. Laurel and Laurel’s position -11	3. <b>Lack of representation from certain sectors (15)</b>
4. The creative, passionate, great folks at the table -10	4. Duplication -10
5. HMIS and other data -7	5. Intersectionalism -7
6. Collaboration -7	6. No Quality of Life metric -5
7. Partnerships with OEO, VSHA, VAHC -6	7. No new board or CoC chair orientation—new members can feel overwhelmed and disempowered -5
8. Increased advocacy -6	8. VSHA, VHC and AHS subsidizes work through in-kind work (no succession plan) -2
9. Coordinated entry -9	9. Some people are skeptical of lead agencies making decisions due to power dynamics (therefore sometimes leadership is not empowered to lead) -2
10. Josh and Peter (open and listening)	
11. Broad geographic and multi-sector representation	
12. Committee work	

- 10. Meeting space -2
- 11. Not always balanced participation—agenda topics (agenda is almost fixed) -2
- 12. Some CoC reps are not empowered decision makers -1
- 13. No shared understanding of coalition finances

## The Key Issue

### Bandwidth/Capacity

While there are many areas in which VCEH could focus to build a stronger organization and increase its impact, none of these options are feasible without more staffing. While the hiring of the support specialist a few years ago greatly strengthened the organization, at the retreat participants prioritized income constraints limiting capacity and bandwidth as more than twice as important as the second most important strength or weakness. Limited bandwidth is the central challenge to overcome. Resolving this challenge will make many opportunities for growth possible. Failure to resolve this issue will make it challenging for the organization to take the necessary steps to grow and thrive. Thus, exploring options to increase revenues to expand bandwidth became a central part of the strategy adopted. Additional capacity could also mitigate the reliance on VSHA, VHC and AHS subsidizing the work through the use of in-kind staff time.

### Secondary Issues

#### How to best leverage the grass roots network VCEH has developed

Connected to, but separate from, the bandwidth issue, is how VCEH could leverage its grass roots network and understanding of local community needs. While there is interest and energy to leverage this network to focus on advocacy issues, state employees, who provide substantial in-kind staffing for VCEH in general, are banned from advocacy activities. Therefore, any staff time to increase advocacy activities would need to be led or managed for VCEH by a non-state entity. Nonetheless, participants at the retreat felt that they were well-positioned to be successful advocates, and that the success of their work depends largely on the state adopting policies that will enable them to be successful. This sentiment was also reported by Luke Dodge in his 2017 assessment report conducted for VCEH. Therefore, a key strategy in this plan is expanded advocacy work.

#### Organizational Infrastructure

In order for the organization to grow and thrive, additional infrastructure is needed. In addition to the bandwidth and capacity referenced above, the organization could improve its:

- Use of technology, including accessing meetings remotely
- Committee effectiveness
- Onboarding process for new chairs
- Use of data and data analysis

Therefore, improving the organization infrastructure is also included as a central component in the strategic plan.

## Outside the Box Ideas

Seven “outside the box” ideas emerged from the data gathering phase of this work. They were:

- Look for increased funding for case managers to prevent homelessness through housing retention
- Pursue funding from the health care world for housing units and/or housing support services
- Merging housing and homelessness coalitions
- Pay for performance – use HMIS performance data to give bonus money to those with the best outcomes
- Promote/use tiny houses, SROs
- Have/Host a conference
- Expand landlord liaison programs

While all of these ideas except “pay for performance” drew some support, promoting the use of tiny houses and SROs and expanding the landlord liaison programs had the most support.

## Strategic Direction

In discussing the above-mentioned trends and possible areas of focus for the next five years, the board has decided upon the following three major initiatives:

1. Increase support for local CoCs to amplify their impact
2. Leverage the grass roots network of VCEH to increase advocacy capacity for services and funding
3. Build organizational infrastructure to increase the organization’s impact

## Strategic Objectives:

### **Increase support for local CoCs to amplify their impact**

1. Increase TA and other support for CoCs
2. Increase supportive services that are available
3. Access and increase sector participation at each local CoC

### **Leverage the grass roots network of VCEH to increase advocacy capacity for services and funding**

### **Build organizational infrastructure to increase the organization’s impact**

4. Explore ways to raise funds to expand staffing and capacity
5. Increased analysis of HMIS data to determine and promote what works
6. Improve the use of technology and meeting space
7. Improve the onboarding process for members and chairs
8. Improve committee effectiveness

## Vendor Overview

ReGeneration Resources is an organizational development consulting firm based in Brattleboro, Vermont, that helps organizations grow, change and manage conflict. Greg Hessel, Principal of ReGeneration Resources, is a professional trainer, facilitator and senior organizational development consultant. Mr. Hessel helps organizations work in a more effective and harmonious manner by

conducting assessment and providing change management, process redesign, conflict management, team building, training, meeting facilitation and strategic planning services to organizations throughout New England.

### Action/Work Plan--VCEH

Strategic Priority	Objective	Action	Owner	Complete by When	
<b>Increase support for local CoCs to amplify their impact</b>	Increase TA and other support for CoCs	Define what TA is needed	CoC Specialist in collaboration with Local Chairs		
		Plan collaboratively with OEO to provide TA	CoC Specialist in collaboration with Local Chairs		
		Develop operating tools to support CoCs including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local board calendars</li> <li>Training for chairs</li> <li>Meeting templates</li> <li>Templates for annual planning</li> <li>Meeting minutes templates</li> <li>Best practices for CoCs planning and decision-making</li> </ul>	CoC Specialist	ongoing	
		Assess geographic parity of resource allocation and capacity	CoC Specialist		
		Use HUD CoC Services Strategically	Ranking team		
		Enhance how local priorities align with state and federal funding			
		Identify and build lateral relations to increase effectiveness	CoC Specialist		
		Define a local CoC	CoC Specialist		
		Increase supportive services available	Identify the type and level of service gaps (housing navigation, housing retention, mental health, ...)	Coordinated Entry Committee	
			Identify opportunities for leveraging service and care coordination		
			Explore funding possibilities		

Strategic Priority	Objective	Action	Owner	Complete by When
	Access and Increase sector participation at each local CoC	Produce a list of funding options for current and future funding		
		Assess who is at the table	CoC Specialist in collaboration with Local Chairs	
		Develop a plan to increase sector participation	CoC Specialist in collaboration with Local Chairs	
		Publish a CoC member list	CoC Support Specialist	
<b>Leverage the grass roots network of VCEH to increase advocacy capacity for services and funding</b>		Formalize the Legislative Committee	Erhard	1/1/19
		Develop a charter that, among other things, defines what advocacy means for this group	Legislative Committee	3/1/19
		Develop an advocacy strategy and plan which includes the action items below	Legislative Committee	6/1/19
		Develop an agreed upon definition of homelessness and ending homelessness		
		Develop a succession plan for Erhard (years 3-5)		
		Conduct outreach at a local level		
		Work with key legislators		
		Recruit and involve people with lived experience and those doing direct service work		
		Develop a training plan		
		Provide training including one on one training		

Strategic Priority	Objective	Action	Owner	Complete by When
		Watch for, and disseminate success stories		
		Develop on early warning system for advocacy		
		Define how success is measured		
		Track success		
		Assess what has worked and not worked in the past		
		Form a group for feedback during the legislative session		
<b>Build organizational infrastructure to increase the organization's impact</b>	Explore ways to expand staffing and capacity	Agree on a plan to pursue increased staffing for both advocacy and non-advocacy related activities	SP Committee	1/1/19
		Explore the role, if any, of a 501(c) 3 organization in increasing infrastructure capacity	SP Committee	1/1/19
		Decide upon the best applicant for new funds	SP Committee	6/1/19
		Explore opportunities to build stronger collaborations with VAHC	Strategic Planning Committee	1/1/19
		Clarify expectations of state partners should HUD funding end (succession plans)	SP Committee	1/1/20
	Increased analysis of HMIS data to determine and promote what works	Conduct an analysis of systems performance measures	ICA and CoC Support Specialist	3/1/19
		Present the analysis to the coalition	ICA and CoC Support Specialist	6/1/19
	Improve the use of technology and meeting space	Explore Zoom and other online platforms that would allow people to call into meetings	CoC Support Specialist	

Strategic Priority	Objective	Action	Owner	Complete by When
		Create a more user-friendly web site	CoC Support Specialist	
		Continually update the new web site	CoC Support Specialist	
		Choose a meeting space that can work with new technology	CoC Support Specialist	
		Continue to explore the use of different modalities and methods of engagement for meetings	Co-Chairs	Ongoing through 2018-19
	Improve the onboarding process for members and chairs	Develop new chair and new board members orientation	CoC Support Specialist	
		Clarify roles and responsibilities for all, and especially new, members	CoC Support Specialist	
		Develop a board calendar	CoC Support Specialist	
	Improve committee effectiveness	Begin a practice of committees each using best practices including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• setting goals and action plans at the start of each year</li> <li>• Meeting regularly</li> <li>• Keeping minutes</li> <li>• Posting minutes online</li> </ul>	Each Committee	1/1/19
		Assess the current decision-making structure	Strategic Planning Committee	3/1/19
		Strengthen the NOFA Committee's role in decision making	Strategic Planning Committee	3/1/19