Emergency Shelter Safety Report September 18, 2023



Background

In Vermont, Emergency Shelter for people experiencing homelessness is provided through a network of private, non-profit organizations based in communities. When shelters are full, then households that are eligible may apply for General Assistance Emergency Housing for a motel voucher. Emergency Shelter, by design, is intended to meet a household's basic needs for shelter while helping them to transition to a safe housing alternative as quickly as possible. Though, in the current housing market, the average length of stay in shelter increased significantly over the past few years as it can be challenging to identify housing.

Vermont's community-based Emergency Shelter network is supported by public funding through the Housing Opportunity Grant Program² administered by the Department for Children and Families Office of Economic Opportunity, which braids together several funding sources, including federal funding from the Department of Housing and Urban Development³. Emergency Shelter projects vary significantly in facility and program design.

- Some shelters are fully congregate (shared bathrooms and bedrooms), while others are non-congregate (separate bathrooms and bedrooms) and many which are semi-congregate spaces.
- For families, most (though not all) Emergency Shelter projects in Vermont are separate emergency apartments, a best practice which creates a more normalized experience for children.
- Many domestic violence shelter providers also maintain their own "motel pool" (supported with state funds) which allows them to place a survivor fleeing domestic/sexual violence in a motel when their shelter is full.
- Some shelters only operate in the cold weather season; these are often referred to as "warming shelters" or "seasonal shelters".4

In general, the Emergency Shelter field has shifted to less congregate settings in recognition that health and safety for guests are often best supported in a less congregate setting, which also provides more dignity⁵. The Department for Children and Families looks to fund Emergency Shelters which operate 24 hours a day, and exceptions are only made when an alternative day shelter space is provided in recognition that some overnight facilities cannot accommodate daytime shelter. Some Emergency Shelter projects are referred to as "low barrier" or "behavior-based", which refers to the goal to reduce the barriers of entry. Lack of income, criminal record, pets, substance use, disability, guest requirements (and so on) can all create real or perceived

¹ Title 24, § 91.5, Emergency shelter means any facility, the primary purpose of which is to provide a temporary shelter for the homeless in general or for specific populations of the homeless and which does not require occupants to sign leases or occupancy agreements.

² Housing Opportunity Grant Program SFY2024 Award Summary

³ Housing & Urban Development Emergency Solutions Grant

⁴ OEO Position Paper on Warming Shelters, 2015

⁵ Reimagining Interim Housing, December 2022, Framework for an Equitable Homelessness Response

barriers to entry. Best practice is to reduce the barriers to entry and predicate the ability to stay in shelter based on behavior.⁶ All Emergency Shelter projects strive to create spaces which are warm and welcoming as well as safe and secure. All Emergency Shelter projects must work to balance the needs of individual guests and staff with the needs of the whole community. Emergency Shelter projects are also required to incorporate the participation and feedback of guests and staff in the operation of shelter. The variety of facilities, size of the project, location, staffing patterns, population of guests (i.e., families, single adults, youth, survivors) are all critical factors for Emergency Shelter projects when creating project policies, procedures, and practices to provide warm and welcoming, safe and secure shelter. In other words, there is no "one size fits all".

At the same time, there are operational requirements and performance expectations for all publicly funded Emergency Shelter projects, including habitability standards, through the Housing Opportunity Grant Program. Regular monitoring of Emergency Shelter projects helps to validate and support compliance, as well as provide an opportunity for technical assistance. To cultivate best practices and develop a strong network of Emergency Shelters, the Office of Economic Opportunity has also provided number of training and technical assistance opportunities for projects over the past several years, which include:

- Shelter Manager Learning Collaborative to receive training and support peer sharing;
- Emergency Shelter Leadership Summit to connect new and returning senior leaders;
- Funding for the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness to coordinate training on a variety of topics, include Equal Access and Mental Health Care;8
- Access to capacity building funds to support organizational development;
- Health assessments and infectious disease prevention and mitigation supports and resources;
- Recorded webinar series on topics including reasonable accommodation, substance use, pest control, etc.⁹

The Emergency Shelter network has undergone dramatic transformation during the pandemic, as significant shelter capacity was lost and new capacity was created. In some cases, Emergency Shelter projects acquired new facilities and changed locations. Some seasonal shelter capacity converted to year-round and in other cases, projects ended and new projects began. In SFY 2019, there was capacity to provide shelter for approximately 562 households, although 180 "beds" were seasonal only. During

⁶ National Alliance to End Homelessness, https://endhomelessness.org/resource/emergency-shelter/

⁷ Housing Opportunity Grant Program Requirements & Guidance

⁸ Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness: https://helpingtohousevt.org/

⁹ OEO Online Training Resources

COVID, the capacity decreased to 168 households, and current capacity is over 525 households, mostly year-round. Preventing and managing COVID within a congregate setting, supporting access to vaccines and testing, all became new challenges for the Emergency Shelter network. In addition, the increase substance use and mental health challenges in communities has led to increased behavioral issues to manage within shelter settings. At the same time, the number of households experiencing homelessness has increased significantly in Vermont, and the demand for Emergency Shelter capacity has increased significantly.

It is important to note that Emergency Shelters do not solve or prevent homelessness, the goal of emergency shelter is to prevent unsheltered homelessness and to create safe options for survivors fleeing domestic/sexual violence. Emergency Shelter will never be a replacement for permanent housing and households in emergency shelter settings are considered homeless. In other words, Emergency Shelters are an important part of our housing crisis response system. The underlying cause and solution to homelessness is affordable housing with access to services based on needs.

Shelter Safety Workgroup

In Spring 2023, Leah Rosin-Pritchard, the Coordinator at Morningside Shelter, was tragically killed at work. Leahs' death prompted deep reflection within the Emergency Shelter field and a desire to renew dialogue between leadership on how to further enhance the safety of guests and staff in Emergency Shelters. In response, the Department for Children and Families Office of Economic Opportunity convened a Shelter Safety Workgroup, composed of seasoned leaders to discuss and make recommendations to enhance shelter safety. In addition, a series of regional De-Escalation & Safety workshops were offered for shelter and outreach staff in September. The Shelter Safety Workgroup conducted a confidential survey on safety practices and experiences of shelter staff in the Summer of 2023. The survey and a summary of results is included as Appendices.

The Shelter Safety Workgroup included:

Avaloy Lanning, Executive Director, NewStory Center
Heidi Lacey, Executive Director, Charter House
Kim Anetsberger, Executive Director, Lamoille Community House
Jonathan Farrell, Executive Director, Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS)
Julie Bond, Co-Director, Good Samaritan Haven
Michael Redmond, Executive Director, Upper Valley Haven
Susan Whitmore, Executive Director, John Graham Housing & Services
Sarah Phillips, Director, Office of Economic Opportunity

Maintaining safe, secure, warm and welcoming Emergency Shelter is a daily reflection and practice within the field. The recommendations below are offered with the shared understanding that enhancing safety is not inherently at odds with providing warm and welcoming shelter. Joint attention and commitment amongst the nonprofit community-based shelter organizations and state government is required to enhance shelter safety. The recommendations below will help to ensure that new and current Emergency Shelter projects are resourced and supported as they rise to meet critical needs for Vermonters.

Recommendations are organized into 4 core areas:

- A) Safety Committees/Workplace Violence Prevention & Response Plans
- B) Training & Technical Assistance
- C) Facility Needs
- D) First Responder Partnerships

A) Safety Committees & Workplace Violence Prevention & Response Planning

All Agency of Human Service grantees and contractors are required to comply with statutory Workplace Violence Prevention & Crisis Response requirements. The Workgroup's review of these requirements concluded that they offer a strong foundation for Shelter organizations. The requirements are included below:

Party shall establish a written workplace violence prevention and crisis response policy meeting the requirements of <u>Act 109 (2016)</u>, <u>33 VSA §8201(b)</u>, for the benefit of employees delivering direct social or mental health services. Party shall, in preparing its policy, consult with the guidelines promulgated by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration for <u>Preventing Workplace Violence for Healthcare and Social Services Workers</u>, as those guidelines may from time to time be amended.

Party, through its violence protection and crisis response committee, shall evaluate the efficacy of its policy, and update the policy as appropriate, at least annually. The policy and any written evaluations thereof shall be provided to employees delivering direct social or mental health services.

Party will ensure that any subcontractor and sub-grantee who hires employees (or contracts with service providers) who deliver social or mental health services directly to individual recipients of such services, complies with all requirements of this Section.

Acknowledging that the statutory requirement is in place and that organizations were at varying levels of implementation, the Workgroup had three recommendations moving forward.

Recommendations

Incorporate more robust monitoring on this requirement into the Housing Opportunity Grant Program

This includes the HOP application and policy review process, regular onsite monitoring and grantee reporting. Monitoring provides an opportunity to ensure the work is underway, to understand the current and emerging needs in the field for training and technical assistance, and to provide real-time support to organizations. Monitoring also helps the Office of Economic Opportunity to build its own knowledge and expertise of the field to support organizations with best practice implementation.

2) Continue Facilitation of the Shelter Manager Learning Collaborative

Shelter managers are key staff who supervise and overseen Emergency Shelter Projects. There has been significant turnover in recent years. The Shelter Manager Learning Collaborative provides a facilitated, co-created peer

environment to receive and provide training on topics and requirements relevant to Emergency Shelter. The Learning Collaborative provides a safe space for practitioners to build skills and expertise on a range of topics. Safety Committees and Policies should be a future and ongoing topic for the Learning Collaborative.

3) Quarterly Executive Director Safety Call

Executive Directors of organizations which operate Emergency Shelters are accountable to ensure that their organizations appropriately prevent and manage risk. Directors agree that there is significant benefit to an optional quarterly call for executive leadership on safety and related topics to share practices and resources. Recommend that the OEO Director convenes this virtual meeting.

B) Training & Technical Assistance

As part of its grants management role, OEO coordinates and delivers training and technical assistance to Emergency Shelter grantees to improve organizational capacity, compliance and impact. Training and technical assistance is delivered through contracted third parties, funding to support consultants, referrals to other state services, direct 1:1 support, "classroom" based delivery, collaborative "community of practice" models, webinars, written guidance, and so on. While training and technical assistance is an OEO responsibility, independent non-profits delivering emergency shelter are also required to provide training to their own employees.

Recommendations

- 1) All Emergency Shelter projects should be required to have a training plan that includes both annual (at a minimum) and onboarding training for all staff on a core set of training topics:
 - Workplace Violence/Crisis Response
 - De-escalation
 - Trauma-Informed Care
 - CPR/First Aid/Overdose Prevention
 - Co-occurring Substance-Use Disorders/Mental Health

Adding a requirement for a training plan allows for organizations to tailor training delivery and curricula to their needs. Training plans could be provided as part of the annual application for funding and/or reviewed during OEO monitoring. Existing Emergency Shelters should be allowed one year for implementation to meet this new requirement.

- 2) OEO should make available resources to support training in these core areas, such as:
 - Recorded webinars
 - Annual in-person training options for shelter staff in at least one topic area

- 3) Continue the State facilitated Shelter Manager Learning Collaborative
- 4) Establish a funding opportunity for Emergency Shelters to apply for periodic, one-time funding to support implementation of any/all of the recommendations within this Shelter Safety Report, such as hiring a consultant to conduce a facility risk assessment and provide organization specific recommendations.
- 5) The Agency of Human Services and Department of Public Safety should collaborate to provide training to a variety of community partners on active threat assessment and response, such has been offered to state employees or school staff. The Shelter Safety Workgroup agreed that this training is needed for Emergency Shelters projects, but also more broadly in the community. It was agreed that a regional, community-based approach for human service organizations to receive this training would be appropriate.

C) Facility Needs

Given the variety of building layouts, populations served, project design, staffing patterns, *etc.*, it is not possible to generate a single set of building recommendations. However, the built environment is a critical component of safety and security.

Recommendations

- 1) Emergency Shelter projects should be required to conduct a building/organization safety risk assessment at least every 2 years, or more frequently when facilities or projects undergo significant change.
- 2) OEO should identify one or more optional resources for Emergency Shelter organizations to support safety risk assessments, such as a self-assessment tool, a consultant, or through a state agency partnership. This is similar to successful past approaches to building organizational capacity in shelters such as the Trauma-Informed Care Initiative (self-assessment, train-the-trainer, *etc.*), or Infectious Disease Prevention (staff assessments, Department of Health partnerships, *etc.*).
- 3) Use a routine monitoring or visit (e.g., Shelter Habitability Inspection) to ensure that a risk assessment has been completed. In this way, OEO staff and Emergency Shelter project staff also have an opportunity to openly communicate on best practices and jointly problem-solve challenges.
- 4) Emergency Shelter projects are encouraged to routinely practice organization/staff response to multiple types of emergency situations, and include debriefing opportunities to support learning and improvements over time.

D) First Responder Partnerships

Even with strong policies and practices to prevent and de-escalate violence, Emergency Shelter organizations rely on trained first responders to arrive and assist at the scene of an emergency or crisis. Maintaining strong communication and relationships with community first responders is an important component of shelter safety.

Recommendations

- 1) Emergency Shelter projects are encouraged to establish regular discussions or meetings with community first responders to create shared expectations in a response and the resources available. In some cases, this may be at a community level and in other communities, it will be a 1:1 meeting between police and Emergency Shelter management. Changes in staffing and policies require a regular opportunity for communication between organizations. These discussions can focus on opportunities to improve response to more routine emergency situations as well as crisis response involving dangerous persons.
- 2) Local Designated Agencies (Community Mental Health Agencies) and Emergency Shelter Organizations should formalize partnerships through a collaboration protocol or memoranda of understanding (MOU). A formal document is a straightforward way to discuss and clarify roles, responsibilities and the way organizations will work together. A formal partnership document should not be static, but updated regularly. Best practices for partnership include embedding mental health outreach staff within Emergency Shelters, including brief intervention and delivery of onsite mental health services and Mental Health First Aid training, etc.
- 3) Expand the role of Mental Health Crisis Teams to be able to respond effectively to situations in Emergency Shelters, this includes prioritizing access to Crisis Teams.

Shelter Safety Survey

The Office of Economic Opportunity has convened a Shelter Safety Workgroup to discuss and make recommendations on how to enhance safety in shelters. As members of the Shelter Safety Workgroup, we want to hear your thoughts on what is currently working, as well as opportunities for improvement in our field moving forward.

As shelter providers, we are a field that is constantly striving to provide shelter that is both a <u>safe & secure</u> and <u>warm & welcoming</u>. Your honest reflections in this anonymous survey will help us to continue to improve.

In taking this survey on safety practices and your experiences, we recognize this may bring up a variety of thoughts or emotions for you. We encourage you to reach out to your supervisor or others to discuss and find support.

This survey is for all staff in shelter organizations in Vermont. Your comments will not be confidential, but will be anonymous. We will not know which shelter organization you work for unless you tell us (which you are not asked or required to do). You can answer all or some questions. A summary of the survey results will be shared. The survey will take about 5-10 minutes to complete.

Thank you for your time and for the critical work you do every day.

The Shelter Safety Workgroup

Avaloy Lanning, NewStory Center

Heidi Lacey, Charter House

Kim Anetsberger, Lamoille Community House

Jonathan Farrell, Executive Director, Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS)

Julie Bond, Co-Director, Good Samaritan Haven

Michael Redmond, Upper Valley Haven

Susan Whitmore, John Graham Housing & Services

training					
staff schedules					
onsite staff:gue:	st ratio				
policies and pro	ocedures				
safety committee	ee				
approach to sec	curity				
prepared/respon	nse if something	j happens			
physical space/f	facility				
after incident de	ebrief and supp	ort			
visitor policies a	and procedures				
communication					
use of technolog	gy				
partnerships wi	th first respond	ers (police, crisis res	ponse, EMS, etc)		
guest entry/adn	nissions				
Other					
Please share any addi	tional details				
Are there things y	our shelter o	_	oing to promote	e safety that yo	u would like t
	our shelter o	r add?			u would like t
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3. Are there other things you would like to see your shelter organization start doing or do more of to promote safety?
supervision
training
staff schedules
onsite staff:guest ratio
policies and procedures
safety committee
approach to security
prepared/response if something happens
enhance or alter the physical space/facility
after incident debrief and support
visitor policies and procedures
partnerships with first responders (police, crisis response, EMS, etc)
use of technology
communication
guest entry/admissions
Other
Please share any additional details
4. Does your shelter organization provide training on any of the following? de-escalation mental health "first aid" incident response first aid/CPR substance use awareness crisis response co-occurring mental health/substance use disorder evacuation procedures/active threat Please share any additional details

5. What kind of training are you not getting, but t	think would be helpful for you in your role?
6. Is there any specific training or training provid shelter organizations?	ler that you think would be helpful for
7. Are you aware of your worksite emergency eva	acuation plan?
not at all familiar	very familiar
8. Are you aware of your shelter organizations wo	orkplace violence prevention and response
not at all familiar	very familiar
9. In the situation of a safety emergency at your where to find the appropriate guidance or resour	-
not at all	almost always
10. Does your shelter organization have a staff Don't Know No Yes Yes Yes and I'm on it Please add any comments	f safety committee?

guests the psychological safety of staff the psychological	0	OOO	0
safety of staff the psychological	0	0	0
the psychological safety of staff the psychological safety of guests	0	\circ	
	\bigcirc	\bigcirc	\bigcirc
Please provide any additional	detail		
2. How well do you bel	ieve your shelter o	rganization	
	Not at all	Somewhat well	Very well
supports guests after an incident occurs	\bigcirc	\circ	\circ
supports staff after an incident occurs	\bigcirc	\circ	\circ
Please provide any additional	detail		
.3. Are there things gue promote safety and secu		d that your shelter organizat	tion could do better t
4. Is there anything els	se you want us to k	now?	

Shelter Safety Survey Results Summary

Individual responses are excluded to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Q1 What do you feel your shelter organization is doing well that helps you feel safe in your role?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
visitor policies and procedures	60.00%
policies and procedures	57.78%
communication	55.56%
guest entry/admissions	53.33%
staff schedules	42.22%
prepared/response if something happens	42.22%
after incident debrief and support	42.22%
partnerships with first responders (police, crisis response, EMS, etc)	42.22%
training	40.00%
use of technology	40.00%
supervision	35.56%
physical space/facility	35.56%
onsite staff:guest ratio	28.89%
approach to security	26.67%
safety committee	6.67%
Other	2.22%

Q2 Are there things your shelter organization is doing to promote safety that you would like to see it keep doing, change, stop or add?

	KEEP	CHANGE	ADD	STOP	TOTAL
guest screening at admission/intake	92.68% 38	2.44% 1	4.88% 2	0.00%	41
guest expectations	79.07% 34	13.95% 6	6.98%	0.00%	43
security cameras	75.00% 33	9.09%	15.91% 7	0.00%	44
room checks	84.62% 33	7.69% 3	5.13% 2	2.56% 1	39
bag checks	66.67% 18	7.41% 2	25.93% 7	0.00%	27
security staff	20.00%	12.00%	64.00% 16	4.00% 1	25
other	50.00%	0.00%	50.00%	0.00%	6

Q3 Are there other things you would like to see your shelter organization start doing or do more of to promote safety?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
training	50.00%
prepared/response if something happens	40.48%
partnerships with first responders (police, crisis response, EMS, etc)	35.71%
safety committee	33.33%
policies and procedures	30.95%
approach to security	30.95%
after incident debrief and support	30.95%
onsite staff:guest ratio	28.57%
enhance or alter the physical space/facility	26.19%
supervision	23.81%
use of technology	23.81%
communication	23.81%
guest entry/admissions	19.05%
staff schedules	16.67%
visitor policies and procedures	16.67%

Q4 Does your shelter organization provide training on any of the following?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
substance use awareness	75.00%
de-escalation	61.36%
first aid/CPR	59.09%
crisis response	36.36%
mental health "first aid"	31.82%
co-occurring mental health/substance use disorder	29.55%
incident response	27.27%
evacuation procedures/active threat	25.00%

Q5 What kind of training are you not getting, but think would be helpful for you in your role?

Tags:

Conflict Management 2

Mental Health First Aid/Mental Health/Co-occuring 12

Crisis Response/Incident Response 8

De-escalation 10

SUD and/or Overdose Prevention 3

Suicide Prevention 1

CPR/First Aid 2

Active Threat/Self Defense 13

All of the Options/Other 3

Q7 Are you aware of your worksite emergency evacuation plan? (Scale of 0 to 100)

BASIC STATISTICS					
MINIMUM	MAXIMUM	MEDIAN	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION	
0.00	100.00	70.00	58.80	36.35	

Q8 Are you aware of your shelter organizations workplace violence prevention and response plan?

(Scale of 0 to 100)

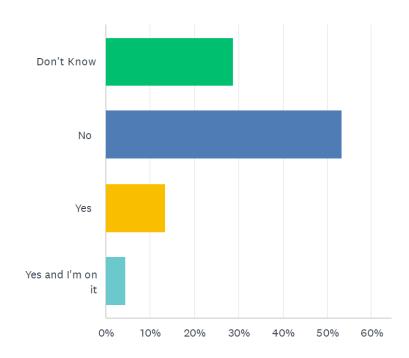
BASIC STATISTICS					
MINIMUM	MAXIMUM	MEDIAN	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION	
0.00	100.00	70.00	58.07	37.79	

Q9 In the situation of a safety emergency at your worksite, would you know what to do or where to find the appropriate guidance or resources?

(Scale of 0 to 100)

BASIC STATISTICS					
MINIMUM	MAXIMUM	MEDIAN	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION	
13.00	100.00	77.50	70.61	28.36	

Q10 Does your shelter organization have a staff safety committee?



Q11 How well do you believe your shelter organization prioritizes...

	NOT AT ALL	SOMEWHAT WELL	VERY WELL	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
the physical safety of guests	2.17% 1	26.09% 12	71.74% 33	46	1.70
the physical safety of staff	6.52% 3	36.96% 17	56.52% 26	46	1.50
the psychological safety of guests	8.70% 4	39.13% 18	52.17% 24	46	1.43
the psychological safety of staff	10.87% 5	45.65% 21	43.48% 20	46	1.33

Q12 How well do you believe your shelter organization ...

	NOT AT ALL	SOMEWHAT WELL	VERY WELL	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
supports guests after an incident occurs	4.55% 2	36.36% 16	59.09% 26	44	1.55
supports staff after an incident occurs	6.52% 3	36.96% 17	56.52% 26	46	1.50