

Hartford Ad Hoc Committee on Emergency Shelter

2/17/22 - Meeting Minutes - 5:00 PM

Committee Members present: Bryan Luikart (Chair), Ally Tufenkjian (Vice Chair), Tom Peltier (Staff Liaison), Scott Sablan, Michael Redmond, Jonathan Chaffee

Community members present: Lola

Bryan called the meeting to order at 5:18pm.

Ally moved the passage of the HADCES minutes of 1/27/22. Scott Sablan seconded. All were in favor and the minutes passed.

Discussion of final HADCES report:

Committee members reviewed and discussed the finalized HADCES report reflecting its work and progress (see addendum at end of minutes for the full report).

Michael Redmond offered additional context on the state of homelessness and the hotel/motel voucher program to consider for the HADCES final presentation to the Selectboard. He shared that he suspects there are currently 80 people in hotel/motels, but will send updated numbers. Last year, 97 people, some who were living in motels, were placed into more permanent housing.

There will be a significant change to the hotel/motel voucher program funding and structure, which is currently being discussed in the legislature. March 31st is the end date of the regular emergency housing program funded through FEMA. Last summer, eligibility criteria for the program was tightened to people such as families, people over 60, people with disabilities, and domestic violence survivors.

FEMA funding will end because the National Emergency will soon be declared over. The state plans to use an alternative source of funding, the Vermont Emergency Rental Assistance Program (VERAP). VERAP funds for the State will be \$352 million total. These funds are typically used to help people with rent payments, but will now apply to the hotel/motel program. How the program works will also change:

- 1) People can be approved one month at a time with lease-like terms and the hotels get paid in advance for up to 18 months; this more closely resembles a “transitional housing” solution. This can include what might resemble a security deposit to pay for any damages.
- 2) The program takes away periods of ineligibility; folks will get multiple chances to correct a mishap.

The General Assistance (GA) program will run alongside this new hotel/motel program with its pre-pandemic rules. If a person doesn't qualify for VERAP, they can qualify under old GA rules.

If the legislature agrees on the budget amendment they are currently considering, the adverse weather policy will be extended until the end of June and will also be paid through VERAP funds.

**VERAP funds last until the end of 2025. Any unused funds gets converted to fund the creation of permanent housing.

This could be a promising opportunity for the Town of Hartford to take advantage of if it has a housing project it wants to support.

Michael Redmond reported that there are currently 166 households on the Coordinated Entry list. 71 are chronically homeless, 77 are not chronically homeless with disabilities, and 18 are not chronically homeless and are non-disabled.

Scott Sablan suggested the Town might find it easier to accept a proposal for a standing committee on homelessness if it specifically worked on solutions for the chronically unhoused.

Bryan suggested the committee keep the tasks for a potential standing committee broad to encompass broader affordable housing goals.

During the 2/22 Selectboard meeting, HADCES will be offering two recommendations: 1) Extending the committee charge for one year to continue working on the RV policy work and 2) Creating a standing committee on homelessness and affordable housing.

Michael Redmond shared that a standing committee on this issue could be a useful focal point with an opportunity for other towns to participate in the efforts regionally.

Discussion on the process of RV policy and the Planning Commission:

Bryan Luikart shared that the committee is getting more clarification from the town's Zoning Administrator about if Rental Housing Code would apply to a trailer/RV parked on a property owned by someone different from the RV occupant. Rental Housing Code would dictate that the RV would need certain requirements, such as a kitchen area, waste disposal system, and a bathroom. The Zoning Administrator and Planning Department Director are awaiting more information from the Public Health Officer about if Rental Housing Code applies in this situation.

Jonathan Chaffee stated that he did not think Rental Housing Code feels applicable in this scenario.

Jonathan moved to adjourn. Scott seconded and all were in favor. The meeting adjourned at 6:15pm.

Respectfully submitted, Ally Tufenkjian (in the absence of Committee Secretary, Simon Dennis)

**Hartford Ad Hoc Committee on Emergency Shelter (HADCES)
Final Report 2022**

Prepared By Committee Members:

Bryan Luikart (Chair)

Ally Tufenkjian (Vice Chair & Selectboard Liaison)

Simon Dennis (Clerk)

Tom Peltier (Staff Liaison)

Michael Redmond

Jonathan Chaffee

Scott Sablan

Introduction

The charge for the Hartford Ad Hoc Committee on Emergency Shelter (HADCES), ratified 12/29/2020 is:

- To investigate the regulatory obstacles to the creation of portable micro-dwellings to provide shelter for people experiencing homelessness
- To submit recommendations to the Selectboard regarding the creation and governance of a permitted encampment to allow unsheltered individuals to dwell legally and safely during the Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter seasons

This brief report will detail the Committee's status on the elements of its charge along with its experiences in seeking emergency shelter solutions. The Committee hopes that its account of the progress it has made along with its challenges offers useful information to Hartford leadership and the Town of Hartford as they continue to seek creative solutions to emergency shelter and affordable housing.

Background on the State of Homelessness

The state of homelessness was reported on by the Ad Hoc Committee on Homelessness on February 23, 2020. Here, we provide updated information and discuss how the landscape of homelessness has changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The housing insecure exist along a continuum of categories including the following:

- camping outside
- living in cars
- those who are doubled up with friends or couch surfing
- people sheltered at the Upper Valley Haven in one of its emergency shelters
- transient populations living in motels at their own expense or through subsidies provided by government or charities
- those at risk of eviction
- emergencies that occur through incidences of domestic violence that result in homelessness
- individuals and families who are housing insecure because they are paying more than 50% of their income on housing expenses, a commonly used standard of “severe rent burden”

The most accurate data on numbers of homeless and housing insecure individuals in our area comes from the Vermont annual Point-in-Time Count (PIT), which takes place on a single day every January. The goal of the PIT is to provide a literal count of those who fit the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s definition of homeless — individuals who “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” The data for the 2022 PIT count has not yet been released and the February 23, 2020 [Ad Hoc Committee on Homelessness Final Report](#) contained numbers through 2019.

Since 2019, the number of homeless people in Windsor County has grown from 91 to 155 (**Figure 1**) and the number of homeless people in all of Vermont increased from 1089 to 2591 (**Figure 2**).

Figure 1. Total number of homeless individuals in Windsor County as defined by the annual PIT count.

Data from the [Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness](#).

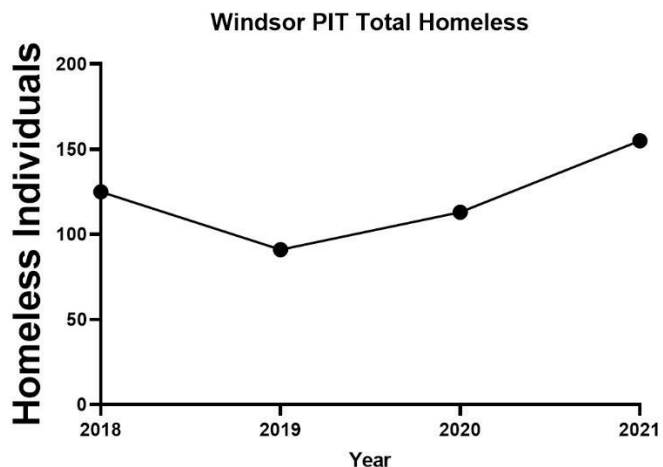
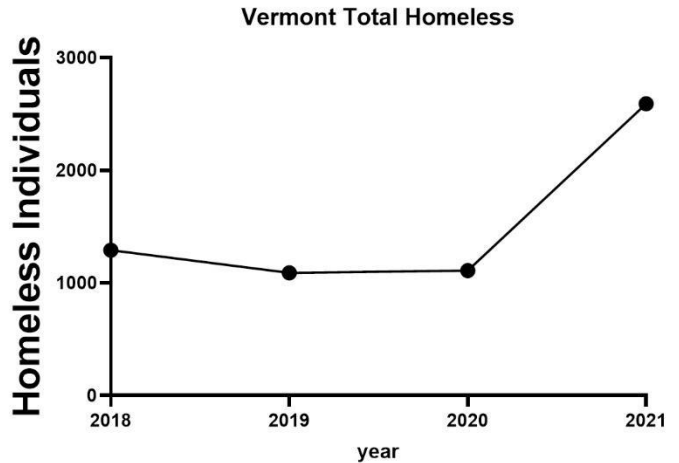


Figure 2. Total number of homeless individuals in Vermont as defined by the annual PIT count.

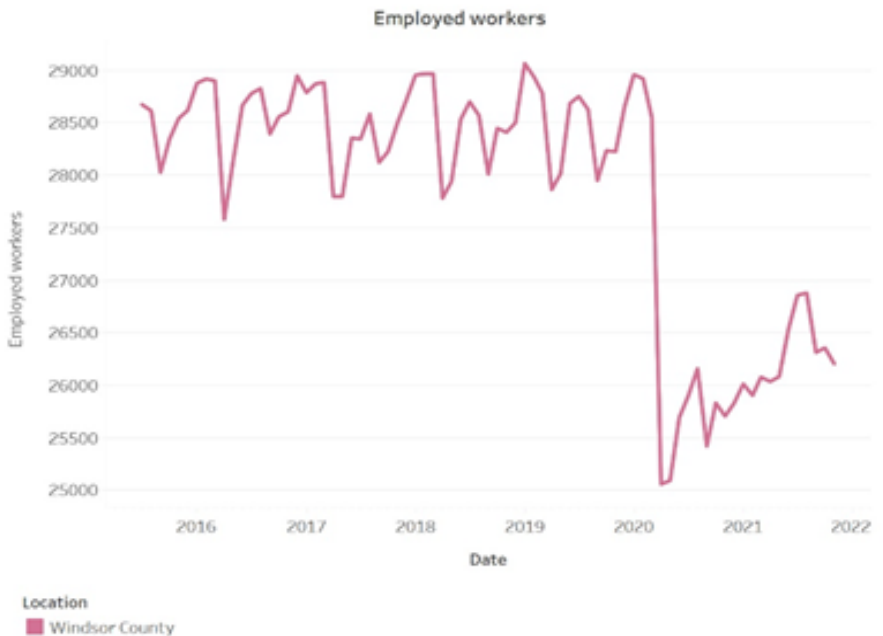
Data from the [Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness](#).



The effects of COVID-19 on affordable housing and employment became more visible in 2021. The World Health Organization issued a state of emergency on January 31, 2020, the United States declared a national emergency on March 13, 2020 and Vermont and New Hampshire also declared a state of emergency on March 13, 2020. These emergency orders had a dramatic impact on employment in Windsor County (**Figure 3**). The emergency orders impacted work availability broadly and disproportionately impacted those in the food and retail industry.

Figure 3. The number of employed workers in Windsor County from 2016 to January 2022.

Data from the [Vermont Housing Finance Agency](#).



The emergency orders shifted the nature of homelessness in 2020 as the State of Vermont began a program that provided hotel and motel vouchers to individuals that were regularly housed in homeless shelters or sleeping outside. According to [WCAX](#), 1,269 adults and 411 children received vouchers for hotel stays on November 22, 2021. As of February 2, 2022, the voucher program is funded through March 1.

On June 22, 2021, the [US News](#) reported that the cost of the voucher program was about \$79 million and that the Federal Emergency Management Agency has reimbursed most of this cost. It was estimated that the program would cost an additional \$108 million for fiscal year 2022. Additionally, the National Alliance to End Homelessness generated a [report](#) detailing the costs of programs supporting the homeless versus the cost of generating permanent supportive housing. This report projected that initiatives to generate supported housing would represent a 49.5% reduction of overall costs supporting the homeless. Amidst the imminent expiration of federal funds for the hotel/motel voucher program and the increase in homeless individuals in Windsor County, HADCES has been searching for solutions to address the homelessness crisis with a focus on unsheltered individuals. Recommendations to address additional layers of homelessness and affordable housing will be addressed later in this report.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted the unhoused population in terms of increased incidents of drug use, addiction and overdose. While the national statistics on opioid deaths for the 12-month period ending in June of 2020 rose 21% in the following 12-month period ending in June of 2021, Vermont's numbers rose 66% for these same time periods ([Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)). Likewise, Windsor County has witnessed a proportionate spike during this timeframe. Because efforts for addiction recovery are often defeated by the struggles associated with homelessness, there is an exceedingly high case-fatality rate for individuals experiencing homelessness ([National Coalition for the Homeless](#)). Hartford lost several unhoused community members throughout 2020 and 2021. This high case-fatality rate for unhoused individuals reflects an additional level of urgency to examine the existing regulatory obstacles to individuals finding safe shelter.

Solutions Envisioned by HADCES

In accordance with the Committee's charge, it has focused its research and efforts on two projects detailed below. The first project has reached a conclusion while the second is still ongoing.

➤ Creating a Permitted Campground for the Unhoused

The Committee has explored the possibility of a community and philanthropy-supported public campground with shelters suitable for year-round camping. Over the course of several months, over one hundred different locations

were reviewed and four locations were discussed in more detail. In order to build a campground with units such as tents, camping cabins or weatherized shelters, they must be permitted to adhere to [Vermont Wastewater Systems and Potable Water Supply Rules](#). The campground must also comply with the [Natural Resources Board Act 250 permit](#). Finally, the campground must obtain all appropriate Fire Safety, Electrical and Plumbing permits. Thus, challenges to this solution include the cost of property and development of electrical, water, and septic systems as well as proximity to public transportation. The Town of Hartford explored the suitability of town-owned properties that could meet the criteria for being developed as a campground and deemed that there were no suitable properties. The Committee therefore explored the costs associated with purchasing and developing parcels of private land currently available on the market. Due to the combination of the associated costs and the regulatory conditions, HADCES has been unable to identify a community or philanthropy-supported organization able to bear the burden of developing a property for this purpose. Ultimately, this project has been put on hold until the right piece of property can be found which meets all of the needed requirements.

➤ **Using Recreational Vehicles as Emergency Shelter**

HADCES has been exploring the use of recreational vehicles (RVs) as portable and temporary emergency shelters. The Committee contends that RVs would offer safe and accessible emergency shelter to individuals who do not qualify for or who cannot otherwise access other housing solutions, such as the hotel/motel voucher program and homeless shelters, as they seek permanent housing. The Committee has been collaborating with Hartford's Department of Planning & Development and Planning Commission to develop a proposal that meets the needs of unhoused community members while meeting necessary health and safety requirements.

Current [Hartford Zoning Regulations](#) state "Except in permitted campgrounds, an RV may not be used as sleeping quarters for more than 14 days per year" (3-13.4.2). However, the [State of Vermont's Environmental Protection Rules, Wastewater System and Potable Water Supply Rules](#), which include the state's regulations on the use of structures as sleeping quarters, do not apply to RVs nor dictate a time limit on the use of RVs as sleeping quarters. To attempt to reconcile this difference between local and state regulations, HADCES recommended the following compromise to the Hartford Planning Commission: "A single RV with a maximum of two separate areas may be used for sleeping quarters by a maximum of two single family/households on a developed lot for more than 14 days per year providing there are facilities and provisions for independent living, including sleeping, sanitation, potable water, and heat. A Zoning Permit must be obtained."

The Committee has met with staff from Hartford's Department of Planning & Development to prepare a proposal to go before the Planning Commission for feedback and potential approval. Below is a progress timeline:

Mar. 24th, 2021	HADCES Chair requests guidance from the Planning Commission Chair regarding how to proceed with the Zoning Regulation Amendment process.
Apr. 15th, 2021	HADCES approves the letter to be sent to the Planning Commission, which requests placing a Zoning Regulation Amendment on an upcoming Planning Commission Agenda.
Apr. 18th, 2021	HADCES Chair sends the letter to the Planning Commission Chair.
Apr. 21st, 2021	Planning Commission Chair responds to the letter from HADCES requesting placement on an upcoming Planning Commission Meeting Agenda.
Apr. 31st, 2021	Planning Commission informs HADCES Chair that it would be necessary to discuss the proposal prior to it coming before the Planning Commission.
June 22nd, 2021	HADCES members meet with the Planning Department and VT State Agency of Natural Resources Director, Terry Sheerer to discuss state limitations on the use of RVs as sleeping quarters.
Aug. 9th, 2021	Proposed first workshop with the Planning Commission (<i>postponed due to lack of agreement about the requested amendment</i>).
Oct. 6th, 2021	Hartford Town Fire Marshal submits a letter about state and local fire safety requirements regarding the use of Recreational Vehicles as sleeping quarters.
Nov. 29th, 2021	Workshop with the Planning Commission to receive feedback and questions on the initial proposal.
Dec. 14th, 2021	HADCES members meet with the Department of Planning & Development Zoning Administrator to address the Planning Commission's questions and revise the proposal.
Jan. 31st, 2022	HADCES members attend an additional meeting with the Department of Planning & Development Zoning Administrator and Health Officer to discuss Vermont Rental Housing Health Code.

Though this process is still in its early stages, a significant amount of Committee and Staff time has been invested as it approaches the one-year mark. This process has sometimes experienced one or two-month delays between subsequent steps.

Recommendations

The Committee's work to approve the use of recreational vehicles as emergency shelters is still in progress. HADCES wishes to continue this process and see it come to fruition as a viable option for unhoused community members who would otherwise be camping outdoors. Based on the timeline and procedures HADCES has undergone thus far, it is anticipated that this will involve at least three additional meetings with the Planning Commission and at least one more with the Selectboard. As the Committee's charge is set to conclude on March 1st, 2022, HADCES recommends that the Selectboard extend its Committee charge for an additional year until March 1st, 2023.

The Committee also recognizes that a solution for unsheltered individuals is only one slice of a complex affordable housing crisis across the region and the state. The Final Report from the Ad Hoc Committee on Homelessness recommends a regional approach to homelessness at three levels: participating agencies in the Upper Valley Continuum of Care meet monthly to discuss federal funding and the state's process; regional service providers participate in the City of Lebanon's *Housing First Work Group*; and working meetings occur between service providers in Hartford and Lebanon to address the specific housing needs of individual households (p. 17). The Town of Hartford could benefit from a standing committee on housing and homelessness to assist in efforts such as:

1. Identifying, tracking and reporting metrics regarding housing stock in Hartford and the state of Hartford's unhoused and unsheltered communities.
2. Identifying regulatory obstacles within State and local legislation to the creation and occupation of affordable housing in Hartford.
3. Assessing strengths and gaps regarding Hartford's housing stock and local and regional services and opportunities for people experiencing homelessness.
4. Identifying opportunities for Hartford to play a role in facilitating the creation of affordable housing and in meeting the needs for unhoused Hartford residents.¹

¹ See the full example charge for a Hartford Committee on Housing and Homelessness.

References

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<https://dec.vermont.gov/water/laws/ww-systems-rules>