VERMONT

Department for Children and Families *Agency of Human Services*
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Dear Chair Squirrell and Members of the Legislative Committee on Administrative Rules,

As was agreed during the October 15th meeting of the Legislative Committee on Administrative Rules, the Department for Children and Families has met with advocates asking for changes to be made to the emergency rules for the Vermont Homelessness Response Continuum. I met with advocates immediately following the October 15th meeting, and three additional meetings have occurred since that date. Another meeting is scheduled for November 13th.

These conversations have been both challenging and fruitful. Representatives from DCF, End Homelessness Vermont, the ACLU, Vermont Legal Aid, the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, 211, the Vermont Early Childhood Advocacy Alliance, and others have attended and raised important issues regarding how they believe the Department's emergency rules can better serve Vermonters experiencing homelessness. From these conversations, the Department has agreed to institute or has already instituted some changes to Level 4 of the Vermont Homelessness Response Continuum (VHRC). Below is a list of topics discussed and outcomes of the conversations.

1. **Room Caps:** The statewide 700 room cap cannot be expanded because it is a statutory limit. However, given that people fleeing domestic or sexual violence can be served in hotels under Act 143 outside of Level 4, the Department no longer counts these households toward the 700 room cap. This frees up capacity for additional unsheltered households.
2. **Role of 211:** Although 211 is not part of the LCAR rule process, DCF has been engaged in conversations with the 211 team to identify functions that could be provided to households seeking shelter through VHRC level 4. Together we have decided it would make sense for 211 to access the DCF system to locate and provide to the motel an existing vouchers if the hotel does not already have the voucher Additionally, 211 could offer a voucher to a different hotel, until the next business day, if an approved household arrives at a hotel to find that there are health/safety concerns such as no water or heat.

This would be limited to households checking in and not households that are already in a room in the hotel. The 211 team also indicated that they could do the 28- day reauthorization. We are exploring whether this is possible, but there may be a technical issue as the ACCESS system is not available for one hour each evening (typically 6pm – 7pm) and there may be information in ACCESS case notes that explain why a reauthorization was not complete. We must avoid situations in which a household has been denied during the day but approved by 211 in the evening. The 28-day reauthorization would not be considered an emergency and should be managed during regular business hours. We continue to work together to get 211 team members access to the system. They have also indicated that they need to train staff. We hope these additional functions will be added soon.

3. **Disability Release of Information:** It came to our attention that periodically ESD requires information from the Office of Disability Determination Services (DDS) about a household's SSI/SSDI claim. This information has historically not been available to ESD workers, as there was not a release of information provision in place. Both divisions are under DCF, so we have taken steps to put such a provision in place to facilitate the easy communication of information relating to SSI/SSDI for a household. The director of DDS is exploring any operational concerns with his team, and we expect to hear back on implementation within a week.
4. **Extension Process:** The Department offered the clarity requested on the level 4 extension process, including the level of engagement expected from households receiving extensions and the conditions that would likely result in extensions. DCF will also provide more detail to households on the reasons for the decision.
5. **Housing Plan Updates:** Meeting attendees discussed client housing plans, required by Act 143, and better ways to show progress toward goals and to demonstrate household engagement in VHRC programs. Advocates and DCF are developing a shared understanding of the type of information needed to support determination of level 4 extension requests, and how to communicate feedback or next steps to case managers.
6. **Case Management Access:** DCF has determined the case management funding and sent out award letters to recipients. DCF will outline expectations for providers. This funding will increase access across the state for household case management.
7. **Room Accessibility:** DCF is actively pursuing additional accessible rooms for use through level 4 of VHRC. We are hopeful the

historical resistance from hotel owners to participation in the program will be reduced with the addition of hotel Case Managers to support people in staying through Level 4 and to address concerns, such as drug use, abusive behavior, disputes and other issues as they arise.

8. **Eligibility:** While some providers have indicated a desire to determine eligibility, providers do not appear to have the capacity or willingness to take on the associated noticing requirements under Act 143. Additionally, there are no immediate replacements for the 7-question HOUSING risk assessment tool currently used. We are exploring an opportunity to combine the HOUSING tool with tools that are already being used by the CoCs.
9. **Notices:** Partners have identified that notices need to be written in plain language at a roughly eighth grade reading level. The Department agrees with this assessment. DCF will work with our partners to develop language that meets all legal requirements and is both accessible and easily understood.

DCF recognizes continued room for collaboration and is committed to working together to build the best program possible that meets both the intent of Act 143 and serves Vermonters experiencing homelessness. We will be meeting Thursday to discuss terminations from the program, oversight and quality monitoring, and opportunities to reduce administrative functions adopted by providers (increase efficiencies).

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Sandi Hoffman, Commissioner
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Agency of Human Services