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Homelessness Phase V Report: Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP) Interviews with HPRP Providers Winter 2010

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HOMELESSNESS PHASE V REPORT
Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP)
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Final Report
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INTRODUCTION

Through its Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP), Vermont's Agency of Human Services (AHS) currently provides grants to sub-recipient organizations (referred to as "HPRP Providers", or simply "providers") to provide housing assistance to the 12 AHS districts. "The primary goal of HPRP is to stabilize or rapidly re-house persons affected by loss of employment or other economic factors." Grants were made to HPRP Providers for the period beginning October 1, 2009 and will expire June 30, 2011. First quarter reports indicate that there are uneven financial expenditure levels in different areas of the State. AHS asked the Vermont Research Partnership (VRP) to research HPRP Providers to better learn policies, practices and procedures amongst providers, to understand the context and demand for homelessness prevention, and to inform future housing policy options and opportunities.

In-person interviews with eleven sites, representing ten of AHS' twelve districts, were completed during early February 2010. A team of four researchers conducted the interviews with 28 staff including executive directors of sub-grantee organizations, program directors in charge of HPRP at their sites, housing counselors and administrators, case managers, fuel assistance personnel, administrators, grant managers, bookkeeping and data management personnel, and field directors. Subsequently, phone interviews with four staff at the remaining two AHS districts were completed in early March. This report, therefore, encompasses all twelve districts and includes data reported from thirteen sites.

Five of the interview sites were smaller, community-based housing organizations. The other eight sites were represented by local Community Action agencies. HPRP Providers that were interviewed include:
▪ Helping Overcome Poverty's Effects (hereafter referred to as Middlebury)
▪ Brattleboro Area Drop In Center (Brattleboro)
▪ Rutland County Housing Coalition (Rutland)
▪ Springfield Supportive Housing Program (Springfield)
▪ Bennington Coalition for the Homeless (Bennington)
▪ Central VT Community Action Council (which covers Barre, Morrisville, Randolph and
  Bradford, and oversees Southeastern Vermont Community Action in Hartford)
▪ Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity (St. Albans and Burlington)
▪ Northeast Kingdom Community Action (St. Johnsbury and Newport)

FINDINGS

The findings are organized in two sections; first, by topics related to policy, procedure, and practice; and second, by context and demand. Based on open-ended questions, these findings generated insight into the multiple variables that influence the operation of HPRP at each of the interview sites. In the future, these could help define quantifiable variables and questions for a potential mixed method survey of sites. The reader should be aware that some inaccuracies in reporting may have resulted from the variability of data collected. In some instances, sites mentioned practices that well may occur in other areas, but simply were not described by those providers.

I   POLICY, PROCEDURE & PRACTICE

Volume, Staffing Levels, and Case Management

Screening and Volume of HPRP Activity
Nearly all sites mentioned that they complete a pre-screening process, which helps streamline the flow of paperwork and assists with making a determination as to whether or not a client qualifies for HPRP funding support. Initial screening processes appear to be a beneficial practice in that the need for completion of a formal application - in several sites the application and related paperwork is reportedly up to 21 pages in length - is averted.

The data collected does not support a consistent or single variable with which to measure volume across all sites. The most frequently reported number was the amount of "assists", or number of times HPRP funds were allocated to either a household or an individual. Appendix A provides a chart, which indicates the variability in the categories providers used to report their data. The variability in data reporting related to the volume of HPRP activity raised the question about how extensive the demand for housing services might be throughout the State (see section II. Context and Demand).

Staffing Levels
All providers reported the availability of dedicated staff to support the application and administration of HPRP funding. Providers of housing assistance reportedly rely on pre-existing staff to support the HPRP screening, application and funding decision processes. In nearly every site, HPRP funding has been used to either add or augment staffing resources in support of HPRP operations. Middlebury was the one exception in that they just recently added dedicated HPRP staff to assist with operation of the program. In other areas, such as Burlington, Springfield, Brattleboro, Morrisville, Barre, St. Johnsbury, Newport, and Bennington, pre-existing programs provided housing assistance before the HPRP funding became available on October 1, 2009. The table below indicates responses to whether providers thought that existing staffing levels were sufficient to meet the demand for services. Newport clarified that initially they did not have enough, but have since been able to request increased hours for their designated staff person.

ENOUGH STAFF	CVOEO		BADIC	SSHP	CVCAC				HOPE	RCHC	NEKCA		BCH
	St. A	Burl	Bratt	Spr	Morr	Barr	Hart	R&B	Midd	Rut	St. J	New	Benn
Yes								•	•				
Get By	•									•	•	•	
No		•	•	•	•	•	•						•

Accessibility of Case Management Services
Interview data revealed that while case management services were funded by some of the HPRP providers, they reported that little *on-going* assistance was offered to clients. Staff reportedly provide significant assistance with the application and approval processes for housing, but do not have the resources to offer follow-up or sustained support once a funding decision has been made. Many described the ability to help clients with budgeting and offering suggestions and pathways for clients to access additional social service supports (e.g. food stamps, now referred to as 3 Squares VT; Reach Up, etc.). Furthermore, responses appeared to indicate that *coordination* of housing assistance was made available, but again, that on-going case management as a follow-up activity was beyond the current capacity given the volume of requests.

Providers often indicated that referrals for case management were made to other community resources or to existing internal resources when and where they existed. It appeared that other funding sources support case management in several provider areas. It also appeared that while case management services, per se, were funded through HPRP, they were not implemented in all sites or at the level previously found at GA pilot locations.

Interpretation of HPRP Guidance, and Funding Assistance Granted

Interpretation of Guidance
All providers reported that the HPRP and AHS guidance requirements were being interpreted as narrowly as possible. A few variances were requested in extenuating situations. Respondents' indicated that the primary program requirements of sustainability and habitability were followed and adhered to. Most frequently denials for assistance resulted from clients not meeting the sustainability criteria. Limits or caps on the amount of each assist, usually no more than $1,500.00, are included in the table below. Also charted is the average amount paid for arrearages on back rent, which generally range from $450 to $989. Utility assists, not listed here, range from $75 to $300 per request.

HOUSING ASSISTS	CVOEO		BADIC	SSHP	CVCAC				HOPE	RCHC	NEKCA		BCH
	St. A	Burl	Bratt	Spr	Morr	Barr	Hart	R&B	Midd	Rut	St. J	New	Benn
Limits / Caps	< or = $1,500	< or = $1,500				< or = $1,500	< or = $1,500	< or = $1,500					
Avg. Amount Paid for Arrearages	$989	$627-$740	$450	$500-$700	$700	$700	$700	$664	n/a	$654	$500-$600	$600	$600

Effect of Payments for Security Deposits and First Month's Rent on Total Allocation
In several areas, such as St. Johnsbury and Hartford, HPRP funding for security deposits is avoided. Randolph and Bradford indicated that they make an allocation for either a security deposit or first month's rent, but not both. St. Albans uses a cap on the amount of assistance, regardless of the category of funding supplied. Middlebury does not set an amount and Burlington and Rutland indicated that these allocations absorb most of the funding available to clients. Up to 25% of Bennington cases are awarded either security deposit or first month's rent. Newport has made exceptions to provide both first month's rent and security deposits in a domestic situation where Reach Up or child support payments have not begun yet.

Many areas reported that when Section 8 housing is available, clients relied on HPRP funding to support payments of a "fair market" security deposit. Several providers questioned this practice as not being particularly helpful for the overall economy, while placing significant financial demands on the amount of funding available. Nearly all areas indicated that recoupment of security deposits was nearly impossible and would be an impractical practice to administer. Some spoke about if requirements for recoupment of security deposits was implemented, then they would need to cease offering assistance in that category of need. While some areas ask for landlords to sign materials indicating that security deposits will be returned, enforcement remains an issue. One area questioned the practice of supplying financial assistance for security deposits and said, "the dollars are a drain on the system and appear to be of limited utility towards supporting the overall economy". Some providers wondered if other strategies related to funding allocations of security deposits needed to be considered.

Criteria Used to Determine Eligibility and Funding Amounts

Criteria used
▪ All sites indicate following eligibility and funding guidelines of HPRP. Barre also follows HUD guidelines and St. Johnsbury mentioned using a "modified" GA point scale. Bennington uses the risk assessment rubric described in the original HPRP grant materials.
▪ Nine sites discussed the importance of income, meaning the ability to pay rent on a sustainable basis, considering income sources such as Reach Up and SSI benefits or a job.

- Middlebury, Barre, and Rutland each mentioned sustainability as important, which can include looking at financial decision-making and priorities of a participant.
- St. Albans, St. Johnsbury, and Barre each mentioned attention to case situations, looking at issues such as disability, domestic violence, and households with children or elderly members.
- St. Johnsbury also looks at past use of agency services, Barre looks at use of motels and shelters.
- Newport customized a prioritization form on which participants need to score at least 12 points for eligibility and sustainability.

Agency definitions or parameters used to meet the "sustainability" criteria
- **Ability to pay rent regularly**: All of the sites mentioned the budget as a major tool in determining sustainability. Participant income must be able to cover rent on a sustainable basis. (For example, some sites discussed debt load and expense variables, such as a car payment that may end in two years, or changes in day care costs.)
- **Willingness to adjust spending**: Participants must be willing to make adjustments in their spending patterns to be able to pay rent regularly. For example, staff mentioned counseling clients to readjust spending patterns so that they can keep up with their rent and hold onto housing, especially if it is Section 8. This could include cutting back on cigarette and snack food purchases, giving up a car, eliminating cable and cell phones, and moving to a less expensive apartment.
- **Referrals to other resources**: Sites generally refer to other community resources and social services. Nine sites refer complex or denied cases to a housing group or task force. In a few areas referrals were made for mortgage assistance to help those who are not HPRP eligible.
- **Using history to predict sustainability**: Many sites look at various histories - of employment, interactions with housing, and emergency needs to try to forecast future employment (though they added that employment prospects are grim at this time). In Rutland, they offer a program called "Rental 101." Middlebury analyzes prior work history and self-sufficiency, to determine the likelihood of a family's financial situation stabilizing.

Perceived Need Beyond What HPRP Provides

No consistent and standard method for determining need across sites
It was difficult for sites to determine exact numbers for perceived need beyond what HPRP provides. Some made attempts to estimate, but what emerged from the discussion was the fact that the many calls or walk-ins that are determined ineligible through a pre-screening process are generally not tracked. Even among sites who do track them, there is not a consistent method for doing so. In addition, those who do not qualify for HPRP and are referred elsewhere to look for assistance are not generally followed to see what transpired. Many sites refer complex cases to local housing groups to see if other resources could help, yet these are not consistently tracked either. One staff person said, "Many partners help house Vermonters and it will be challenging to gather all of the data as many people are not being tracked in any way." Three examples of tracking need are as follows:
- In Barre, staff logged 100 contacts for two days, and then multiplied an average of 50 contacts per day by the number of work days since October 1 to arrive at an estimated number of 2500 requests for HPRP funding. Out of these, they approved 121 cases and 40 were still pending. The rest were pre-screened or denied and referred elsewhere.
- Brattleboro has developed a chronically homeless data set, which tracked 87 people in an overflow shelter and 1343 bed nights since October.
- Bennington staff estimated that 10% of their applicants were denied. Of these, some were not qualified at all, and others either found help elsewhere or their needs went unmet.

Populations whose housing needs are not met through HPRP
During the discussion of perceived need beyond what HPRP provides, staff discussed some of the populations who do not qualify for HPRP, such as people who are at risk of losing permanent housing while waiting for SSDI determination, which can take up to two years; people without income or housing; those with barriers to housing such as children and pets; those on probation and parole or coming out of corrections; those with GA; those who get too far behind in rent due to an unexpected set back like a car breaking down or maternity leave; single people, including those who are not disabled but have no resources and no place to go; single parents who lose their Reach Up grant when their children come into DCF custody; young people over age 18 who can barely care for themselves, are not connected to the social service system, and whose parents are unavailable; seasonal and casual employees who cannot qualify for unemployment; those who are "couch surfing" and "doubling up" in living spaces; and a population of people who are paying to house themselves in motels. In addition, providers mentioned people who were middle income and now sought services, but were encumbered by unsustainable budgets (e.g. lost jobs and carrying huge debt loads such as credit card and car payments; often supporting children and grandchildren with disabilities). Further, they explained that many of these people did not have existing connections to community services. In Bennington, people in new trailer parks with a rent to own option do not qualify for HPRP assistance, because their trailer payment is considered a mortgage even though the land is a rental.

Scarcity of social supports
Staff also pointed to needs that are beyond what HPRP can provide such as intensive case management, mortgage assistance, subsidized housing, boarding houses, and additional shelter space. Bennington staff would like to see more subsidies for families to live in places that are suitable for children, for example, places that are in better repair. They shared concerns about what will happen when unemployment benefits run out; when anticipated cuts in Reach Up, food stamps and Home Health, as well as limits on emergency room use are implemented; and how people with mental or physical barriers will navigate Economic Service's new automated phone system.

Tracking of Denials

Need for consistent tracking of formal and informal denials
Denials are generally for those applicants who have completed formal applications. Rutland, Middlebury, and Springfield mentioned referring these denials to other groups. However, beyond that referral, they may not follow the outcome. Some sites, especially those with large amounts of requests, employ an informal pre-screening process before the point of formal application. These informal denials are not generally tracked, though many are referred to other services. One suggestion for tracking, from site staff in Central Vermont, is to have sites keep a daily record of denials. But, as one staff member put it, "Service Point is a full time job on its own."

Methods used for tracking of formal denials
▪ **Electronic Record**: Seven sites maintain a computer record (Service Point was specifically mentioned in Brattleboro, Bennington and St. Johnsbury, though one staff added that there is no place to enter a reason for denial into the system). A few sites, such as Newport, use an internal data base in addition to Service Point and HMIS.
▪ **Hard Copies**: Hartford, Springfield and Brattleboro each specifically mentioned keeping hard copies of denial letters on file. Rutland, Barre, and Hartford each note denials in the case record or on the family data plan (NCR form). In Newport, a client signs a form that indicates they are denied and why. However, denials are rare because most clients leave the office with

some form of assistance, even if not from HPRP. Bennington staff send a letter to applicants and write the reason for denial on the application.

Expectations Related to Reciprocity from Participants

▪ **Clients often contribute their own funds to supplement an HPRP assist**: Many sites gave a portion of the total funds requested and asked the clients to supplement with other sources of income. Hartford's site, for instance, indicated that more clients contribute than not. In Newport, clients who are assisted with crisis fuel payments have to arrange a repayment plan with the utility company for utility arrearages.
▪ **Agency expectations of participants to repay HPRP funds are minimal or optional**: A few sites had some expectation of repayment, such as through tax refunds, but these were generally optional or not rigidly enforced. Others indicated conflicting regulations regarding reciprocity.
▪ **Non-monetary voluntarism**: Brattleboro and Morrisville staff engaged clients in volunteer efforts, such as helping other participants move furniture or clean an apartment. Bennington and St. Johnsbury encouraged clients to participate in volunteer activities such as meal preparation.

Application Materials and the Ability to Screen In and Out

Applications and related paperwork
All sites have established application materials for administration of the HPRP. Several found the initial start up phases of HPRP difficult as new forms were added up to a month into the program. Some sites created simplified worksheets to make the application process more efficient. In St. Albans, St. Johnsbury, and Barre the applications are over 20 pages in length; in Morrisville, Middlebury, Newport and Brattleboro, from 10 to 18 pages; and in Burlington, Springfield and Hartford under 10 pages in length. It appears that in those sites that previously offered housing assistance in their community, pre-screening tools are utilized prior to completion of HPRP materials. Apparent methods for streamlining and reducing the amount of paperwork required to manage the program had been made, all the while remaining within and meeting the overall program requirements. Springfield, Hartford and Burlington seemed to have made strides in paring the application materials to a reasonable size.

How staff calculates participant expenses and income, including public benefits
All sites use a 30 day income and expense sheet as part of their application packet. In addition, sites like Rutland look at current levels of debt and long term debt obligations. Some, such as Rutland, ask for formal documentation, or like Springfield, ask for proof of income. All sites count public monetary benefits, such as GA and Reach Up, as income. Non-monetary benefits such as food stamps figure into staff evaluation of sustainability, since these free up resources for other basic needs. Staff members verify public benefit amounts, to the extent possible, with AHS DCF - Economic Services.

Spending Patterns and Utilization of Teams

Spending Patterns
Springfield, Morrisville, Middlebury, Rutland, and Newport reported that they were on target for spending HPRP funds for the period October 1, 2009 - June 30, 2010. However, in a majority of areas, spending exceeded budget projections for the remainder of the HPRP's year one grant period. The sizable demand for housing assistance coupled with challenging economic times appeared to present circumstances in which the supply and disbursement of limited funds created, understandably, a burden for provider staff. Data seemed to clearly indicate that providers were working to the best of their ability to meet HPRP programmatic requirements,

while assuring assistance was made to those in need. The chart below indicates the reasons reported for several regions that were exceeding budgeted amounts during the first quarter of the HPRP.

Expenditures Ahead of Budget Allocation for Oct. 1, 2009 - June 30, 2010

Interview Site	Reason for Level of Expenditure
St. Albans	Demand and qualifying need for assistance was high
St. Johnsbury	HPRP funds used purposefully during first quarter to fill gap left by delay in receipt of fuel assistance funding
Burlington	Original allocation of HPRP funding was too low
Brattleboro	Initial demand, backlog and qualifying need for assistance was high
Barre	Lag in data entry due to high demand and limited staff
Hartford	Original allocation of HPRP funding was too low
Rand & Bradford	Misunderstanding about amount of budget allocation available
Bennington	Greater need than expected

It should be noted that in Brattleboro, Barre, and Burlington there was an overwhelming response to access HPRP funding when the program began operations on October 1st. Reportedly, clients had been waiting for the onset of funding assistance and thus, demand had been building in these areas for months in advance of the funds becoming available. In a majority of areas, demand was reported to be higher during the winter months. Finally, many spoke about a relief in the demand that may result in the spring as tax refunds would be distributed and available to many of those in need. Newport anticipates fewer fuel assists as the weather warms up. Some sites have cut back on the average dollar amount of an assist as remaining money decreases.

Utilization of Teams
Most sites reported that staff devoted to HPRP operations was able to render decisions about funding allocations. The utilization of housing teams, however, was almost always used for situations that were not "clear cut". In the more complicated cases, or on the occasion when denials were in order, housing teams' advice and counsel was sought. Housing teams were also often used as a forum for locating additional resources that might either supplement or replace the need for HPRP funding. In Middlebury and Rutland housing teams were used exclusively as the method for rendering all HPRP related funding decisions.

Recommended Policies, Practices and Procedures to Enhance HPRP

Staff made the following recommendations for improvements to policies, practices and procedures:

Simplify application and data entry processes:
▪ Brattleboro staff, who value Service Point and use it daily, need a better way to track denials and incomplete applications in Service Point. They would like dedicated places to write a reason for denial, to list other community resources, and to enter case notes. One person suggested adding spell check.
▪ Springfield staff would like HMIS to be more "user friendly" with smoother data entry and logical questions. For example, eliminate questions that are not appropriate to children (such as veteran status and housing status) when they are the same as their parents. Add a place to log the cost of case management. Make it easy to back track through the program to fill in missed

information. One person observed that many staff are intimidated by HMIS and believes Service Point could make it easier. Morrisville also suggested eliminating redundant questions on the HPRP application.

- A couple sites suggest linking databases so information can be entered once. Morrisville staff explained, "Currently the HPRP application is done on paper, then entered into a database, then entered on a spreadsheet, then entered into Service Point/HMIS, then filed, then faxed to the main Community Action office (Brenda) for entry into their database. This comes after all the work to help a person get settled. Newport might use up to four databases, including an internal system they have customized to provide variable information requested by multiple funders and to share data among their own staff.
- St. Albans said the application needs to be shorter, especially for those clients where there is no case management needed.
- Newport staff recommended keeping a copy of the signature page of a lease rather than all eight pages that are similar for many apartments.
- According to Rutland staff, the project itself is working well but it would be nice to have a single application for all the housing related programs.
- Barre staff members explained that changes and additions in rules and requirements complicate matters. The structure, understaffing and volume of need make it difficult to back track.

Consider additional funding, staff positions and strategies:
- At least five sites emphasized that it is essential for funding to continue or be sustained (Bennington, Burlington, Rutland, Middlebury, and Morrisville).
- Morrisville and Barre would like additional staff positions to assist with paperwork, data entry, and case management. Bennington has a staff position devoted to data entry for its various programs.
- Springfield recommends funding case management for selected cases that are denied to help them work toward sustainability; (i.e. to meet the needs of the 158 who don't get into the transitional supported housing program.
- Burlington staff suggest funding alternatives to expensive hotel stays that lead to participant stability.

Increase flexibility in eligibility and ability to assist across service areas:
- Hartford's office staff would like to see more flexibility in eligibility (e.g., probation and parole clients, those with felony) and the ability to help people in neighboring jurisdictions.
- Staff at several sites also mentioned the lack of back mortgage assistance through HPRP and other sources. One person was aware that HUD has a comparable policy to do loan modifications. However, it requires paperwork for every assist that banks are not willing to do. Newport staff said they would like to be allowed to provide mortgage assistance, even if it were just on the principal.

Improve coordination between HPRP and VSHA to enhance inspection process:
- Several sites would like to see improved communication and coordination with the Vermont Housing Authority to streamline processes surrounding housing inspections. Given the long wait list for subsidized housing, staff members have experienced that HPRP participants can lose housing promised to them if the process takes too long.
- One site suggests eliminating the requirement of a second inspection if it is something minor that the staff person can review with the landlord. The savings of $50 could be used to assist more participants.
- Still other sites would like to improve access to necessary VSHA information, particularly a direct link to VSHA staff who have updated information.
- VSHA recommends training for providers to facilitate improved coordination.

Build on gains made with internal and external partnerships:
▪ Brattleboro uses the Self Sufficiency Matrix regularly and finds it useful.
▪ Rutland staff noted the positive effects of HPRP on the relationship between housing entities
  and city government and would like to see these strengthened. For example, the requirement
  for a certificate of occupancy means HPRP staff must involve the city's housing officer, who in
  turn gets access to spaces the city would like to assure are safe.
▪ The Field Director in Brattleboro said HPRP is part of a smooth system that capitalizes on
  everything available – it is "seamless" for clients.
▪ Some sites acknowledged a greater ability to function efficiently once HPRP guidance from
  Waterbury had stabilized after the initial 'start up' phase. A few would like to see this AHS
  guidance further strengthened to help sites stay on track with their spending. Suggestions
  include guidance about funding limits and how much to give in an assist, as well as sharing of
  best practices that help monitor and supplement HPRP spending.
▪ Rutland has developed ways to help people preparing to transition out of Corrections. Rutland
  staff work to help them develop a budget, start a savings plan toward a security deposit, and
  begin exploring options beyond the DOC bed. The RCHC case manager will help them with
  finding furniture and applying for other sources of support.

Attend to concerns about AHS DCF - Economic Services modernization:
▪ Springfield staff are concerned about the impact of AHS DCF - Economic Services (ES)
  modernization on interagency collaboration to share resources and knowledge. In Springfield,
  ES has been an important player in the established and valued Housing Task Force (HTF).
  Some perceive that modernization shifts the burden of confirming income (through the Access
  database) from ES staff to HPRP staff.
▪ Morrisville staff members say it is essential to collaborate with AHS to be able to talk to a
  person and get needs met in a timely fashion, especially when it concerns the health and safety
  of their participants. One said *"I haven't gotten a reply to two messages in two and a half
  days."*
▪ Staff in Burlington pointed out similar challenges. They have no access to the databases such
  as ACCESS to confirm client income and ability to pay. If they want to confirm the amount of
  Reach Up benefits, it is much more time consuming to get this information now. Another
  problem is that Housing Resource Center and Community Action staff may inadvertently
  provide client information that hurts the client's ability to obtain assistance.
▪ One person observed that calling ES to confirm benefits now takes 25 minutes instead of one
  minute, as a result of modernization.
▪ Morrisville staff discussed another issue, the "computer gap," noting that many of their clients
  do not own computers and are computer illiterate. One had three people on her current
  caseload who cannot read or write. Her colleague commented that some clients are good at
  hiding it. However, when they have to go online to look for a job or apply for welfare, this can
  become a problem with dire consequences. Morrisville staff have observed other staff who do
  not realize this make assumption and judgments. They ignore disabilities and misunderstand
  non-compliance. Other agencies send their clients to Community Action so they can get help
  filling out paperwork. This stretches staff time very thin.
▪ Newport staff echoed concerns about clients who have limited access to computers and are
  illiterate. They worry about those on vendored payments who could lose housing if they are not
  able to figure out the new system. Staff shared the perception that there is little support in
  terms of resources from the state to organizations who have to manage this whole process and
  offer support to clients. They fear a difficult transition that will increase the caseload initially.
▪ Bennington staff said the transition to the call-in center was initially problematic but calls are
  fewer now that glitches have been resolved. The HPRP staff person due to limited time has a
  direct line to ES and does not use the call in center at all. However, the elderly and people with
  disabilities have difficulties with the automated system.

Add social supports that enhance sustainability:
- Staff in Randolph and Bradford shared stories that show how public assistance is not enough for sustainability. They pointed to the need for single room occupancy boarding houses; and how essential it is to have a residence and car to find work in a rural area like Bradford.
- Middlebury would like to see a simplification of the system and also see a huge need for single room occupancy projects with a communal capacity for meals, case management, and support.
- Springfield staff added case management, more subsidized housing, and more vouchers as important practices. According to Springfield and Rutland staff, State funded housing vouchers would allow HPRP to help more people.
- Rutland added that a related program that upgraded units to meet CO standards might be a help.

II   CONTEXT & DEMAND FOR HOUSING SERVICES

Characteristics of the Local Community

Sites were asked to describe characteristics of their area that may be impacting the demand for HPRP funding. The chart below, while in no way inclusive or exhaustive, begins to outline variables that may be linked to the demand for housing in a local community.

COMMUNITY CHARACTER-ISTICS	CVOEO		BADIC	SSHP	CVCAC				HOPE	RCHC	NEKCA		BCH
	St. A	Burl	Bratt	Spr	Morr	Barr	Hart	R&B	Midd	Rut	St. J	New	Benn
Few Community Resources				●			●						
Ltd. Availability of Affordable Housing	●	●	●	●	●		●			●	●		●
High Unemploy-ment Rate	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	
Ltd. Availability of Livable Wage Jobs	●	●	●	●	●		●		●	●	●	●	●
Ltd. Availability of Rental Housing Stock		●	●				●						
Transient Population		●	●				●					●	
Increasing or High Rate of Domestic Violence	●		●	●			●	●		●	●	●	●

Additional characteristics mentioned during the interviews are indicated in the chart below. Responses gathered are not to be interpreted as being exclusive to one area or another. The chart, rather, represents data reported and again, is not necessarily indicative that similar characteristics may not be found in other areas of the State as well.

Additional CHARACTERISTICS MENTIONED	CVOEO		BADIC	SSHP	CVCAC				HOPE	RCHC	NEKCA		BCH
	St. A	Burl	Bratt	Spr	Morr	Barr	Hart	R&B	Midd	Rut	St. J	New	Benn
Difficulty in Employing Offenders	•				•						•	•	•
Quality of Housing Stock Poor									•		•	•	•
Growing Refugee Population		•											
Transportation Barriers	•					•		•			•	•	•
High H.S. Dropout Rate				•									•
High Rates of Substance Abuse	•						•				•	•	•
Shelters at or Beyond Capacity					•						•	•	•
Proximity to Border			•										•

Key Stakeholders and Collaboration Amongst Providers

All sites discussed the key internal and external stakeholders they rely on to administer HPRP funds. There were interesting differences in that some of the community action agencies seemed to rely more on internal staff and less on external collaborators. Other providers appeared to include external collaborators as a more regular practice. A few that relied on internal staff shared the perception that they did not have access to as many external partners or collaborators as other districts might.

Common external partners may include: the AHS Field Directors; AHS DCF - Economic Services Division; Community Action agencies; United Way; the Vermont State Housing Authority; and shelters, transitional housing and domestic violence organizations in the areas where they exist. Others mentioned include mental health and counseling services (Bennington, Brattleboro, Middlebury), area landlords, which in some cases includes a larger organization such as the Brattleboro Land Trust (Brattleboro, Rutland and Springfield); the Parent/Child Center (Middlebury); Southwest Council on Aging, Veteran's Administration, PAVE, BROC, DOC, interfaith councils, churches, and the Regional Affordable Housing Corporation (Bennington); DOC and Neighborworks (Rutland); and Brattleboro Housing Authority and the Help Fund Committee (Brattleboro).

Internal stakeholders may include: staff involved with HPRP such as housing counselors, case managers, bookkeepers or accountants; and the grantee organizations: CVCAC, SEVCA, NEKCA, and CVOEO, Helping Overcome Poverty's Effects (HOPE), Rutland County Housing Coalition (RCHC), Springfield Supported Housing Program (SSHP), Brattleboro Area Drop-In Center, and Bennington Coalition for the Homeless.

Collaborative processes that are working well

A few sites discussed assorted processes that make collaboration possible:
▪ St. Albans shared its philosophy of "housing clients first."
▪ Newport and St. Johnsbury's NEKCA often bring cases to their community housing group, the Community Partners Team (CPT).

- Rutland stakeholders meet regularly and will soon be holding these meetings at the State Offices. Middlebury has a long history of being part of the Affordable Housing Coalition, Housing Solutions and the Continuum of Care groups. They have developed a single application for Housing Solutions and share a commitment to social and economic justice.
- Brattleboro and Burlington staff members participate on different housing related groups that meet weekly in succession, so that each meeting can help them prepare to make the most of the next meeting's knowledge and resources.
- Newport appreciated the statewide sharing among HPRP providers and AHS administrators. Their HPRP staff also found a key internal point person helpful, who listened to concerns of staff, and kept them informed of the HPRP budget so spending could stay on track.
- Members of the Bennington Housing Solutions group created the collaborative process that they use, so there is a shared sense of ownership and commitment to the process.

Barriers to collaboration that providers experience

Difficulty getting accurate information in a timely and efficient manner:
- Five sites discussed an unintended consequence of AHS modernization as negatively impacting their ability to access necessary information (verification of benefits) in a timely fashion from the ACCESS database at ES (Burlington, Springfield, Barre, Morrisville, Randolph and Bradford). Currently, staff have to call the State Call-in-Center while the participant is present and have the participant sign an affidavit. It takes a long time to wait due to call volume at the center. This cannot be avoided because HUD requires a 3rd party verification if a process for that is in place. One person explained: *"We have to have a direct avenue to supervisors of the clients coming to see us. We have to prove income to prove sustainable in order to do HPRP. We can't determine this by looking at a computer. We can look at the computer to see current income; however, Reach Up is based on rent needed and gets cut if someone is homeless or not paying rent. We need to know what it will increase to next month when rent is included. We need to talk to a worker to confirm accuracy and truth."*
- Regarding SSI and SSDI, staff said there is not a way to get information, even with a release from the client. They will release it if the client calls, but usually they cannot get through on the telephone.

Additional barriers:
- St. Albans said mental health and substance abuse treatment must be referred out and the voluntary nature of these services interferes with stabile housing placements.
- Middlebury staff said the HPRP funding process left bad feelings among collaborators.
- Brattleboro mentioned community attitudes (the worthy vs. unworthy poor), client motivation to change when it is lacking, and the balance of responsibility between agencies and occasional territorialism regarding resources.
- Hartford discussed funding limitations for various programs including HPRP, eligibility limits, and in some cases, landlord attitudes and follow through.
- Barre said funds in general are the major barrier.
- Many of these 11 sites have a long history in their communities and HPRP is a recent addition, a temporary funding source that helps them accomplish goals related to their mission. According to some staff, this can lead to role conflicts between being an advocate and being a sub-grantee of AHS. At other times it can create great internal conflict when HPRP does not allow them to fulfill their mission because they are not allowed to pay mortgage arrearages for people losing their homes. A Morrisville staff person observed that they have gradually taken on the role that formerly belonged to the "local welfare department."
- If top level organizational decision makers in Bennington are occasionally not present at a group meeting, it can delay the collaborative process.
- Heavy staff workload can be a barrier.

Recommendations for Allocation of Additional HPRP Funds

Six sites discouraged using past GA spending as an indicator for future allocations. They shared the perception that overspending should not be rewarded if it is due to poor budget management. Nine sites recommended basing the allocations on a variety of measures of a district's actual need so that allocations will be equitable.

Various ideas were presented for how to determine allocations based on need:
- Rutland suggested multiple variables such as population, poverty rates, available resources, unemployment and future prospects.
- Brattleboro added free and reduced lunch eligibility to the poverty criteria.
- Springfield suggested taking Reach Up and Food Stamp caseloads into consideration. They also suggested some standard measure that is more objective than sustainability. If there is no contingency funding next year, they suggested saving this year's contingency for next year.
- Morrisville staff added criteria such as the Point in Time Count, lack of affordable and subsidized housing, availability of shelter – acknowledging their restrictions; and DOC releases that need housing. Morrisville suggested involving the direct service provider in decision-making about allocation, and requiring proof that money is spent responsibly.
- Barre staff added the following criteria: population and the number of cities and towns in a service area; availability of outside resources or other pools of money; numbers of people involved in informal self unemployment; and impacts of the recession. One Barre staff member suggested comparing HPRP spending to traditional GA spending in prior years as well as comparing current food stamp use to prior years.
- Hartford staff added the variables of cost of living and cost of housing to the number of people in need. Staff in Randolph and Bradford would prefer to use Reach Up caseloads as criteria instead of poverty or population rates. They also suggested the Point in Time count but said it may not reach the hidden homeless. Staff wondered if the ongoing GA caseload is expanding. One person suggested obtaining self employment figures from the Center for Rural Studies and casual economy stats from a think tank in Washington, DC. They would also like to know the number of people eligible for HPRP if it were possible to get those statistics.
- Newport staff anticipate increased demand in their service area beginning in May, as one mill is closing, another is laying off long time workers, and unemployment benefits will be ending. Many of these workers are homeowners.
- Bennington staff recommended basing allocation on a three year average of various factors such as population, unemployment and poverty rates, Point-in-Time Homeless counts, and resources in an area such as the availability of shelters. Incidentally, Bennington's Continuum of Care Coalition studied spending by nine organizations to address housing needs, which totaled $560,000 in 2008. Staff noted this is six times the amount allotted for HPRP.

A few sites recommended some type of equal distribution:
- St. Johnsbury and Newport suggested the money should be distributed equally.
- Middlebury added that it should be distributed equally on a per capita basis, weighted for household income.

CONCLUSION

One of the key findings of this research has been the variability in context and demand for services among sites, making it challenging to determine a standardized solution to the problem of how best to allocate limited resources. Differences in community characteristics and histories, provider working environments, role demands, and expectations of various funding sources, are a few of the variables that affect operations of the HPRP among sites. Available human and

economic resources in an area as well as business, housing, transportation, and public services all play a role. It matters whether a district has rural towns or cities and how many, or whether it serves people living in depressed or thriving areas. Job design and organizational pressures may influence the experience of the person working in an agency, and in turn, individual working preferences, efficiency, and necessity may influence how many resources and collaborations are explored. Funding sources in addition to HPRP drive additional paperwork requirements, along with the need for electronic and hard copy records in this age of transition to a paperless society.

Nevertheless, some common themes emerged and sites made recommendations for decision-makers to gain a broad enough understanding of the variables to be able to make a "fairer" decision, knowing, as one staff person said, there is "no perfect way" to distribute the HPRP funding. In the process, researchers gleaned information on how sites are managing with the opportunities and barriers they face, and how staff recommend improving policy, practice, and procedure so they can better meet their mission of helping Vermonters in need of housing during tough economic times. This information will hopefully prove useful while HPRP funds are available, and may be able to inform decision-making about future housing programs as well. In the meantime, it appears that a uniform tracking method for determining the unmet need and demand for housing services would be recommended.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS BASED UPON FINDINGS

- Develop Methods for Uniform Data Collection for:
  - Denials – develop a simplistic and easily manageable method for tracking denials. Assure common definitions are agreed upon in advance of implementing tracking method.
  - Unmet Need – develop methodology for determining what might be considered the "unmet need" among the population that seeks housing assistance. Complete further analysis to create a uniform method for determining this.
- Devise a Strategy for Addressing Security Deposits
  - Seek further recommendations for developing a strategy to address the recoupment, and initial payment of security deposits.
- Address Concerns Raised About AHS DCF - Economic Services Modernization
  - Assess the impact of modernization/call-center and redesigns of GA on community-based housing assistance organizations.
  - Devise methods for providing access to ACCESS for those assisting with HPRP administration.
- Develop Common Definition for Case Management
  - Arrive at a common understanding of what is meant by the term "case management".
  - Assess the gaps in capacity for provision of case management services.
- Make Determination for Basis of Future Fiscal Allocations in FY'11

Appendix A

HPRP Reported Volume

The table below indicates the category in which volume was reported at each of the original eleven sites interviewed. Categories included: number of requests made, applications completed, funding assists made, denials recorded, and applications in process or pending. Please note the research team recognizes that the data reported below is incomplete and does not necessarily reflect the availability of data elements across all sites. Also note that 85% of Newport's assists were for utilities only, through February 28, 2010.

A definition of the categories is described below the chart. For the period October 1, 2009 through January 31, 2010, the numbers reported were as follows:

Reported VOLUME*	CVOEO		BADIC	SSHP	CVCAC				HOPE	RCHC	NEKCA		BCH
	St. A	Burl	Bratt	Spr	Morr	Barr	Hart	R&B	Midd	Rut	St. J	New	Benn
Requests	382	993			279								
Applications			127	127						63			261
Assists	91	247	62	72		121	40	10	25		115	580	116
Denials	75		42	49								4	
In Process			20	6	40								

*Definition of Terms Listed Above:
Requests = requests for HPRP funds that were tracked in provider database
Applications = HPRP applications completed
Assists = HPRP funding made available to clients
Denials = "formal" denials made for HPRP funding
In Process = decision pending or paperwork in process