

**Public Testimony for the Joint Fiscal Committee**  
**Julie Bond, Co-Executive Director**  
**Good Samaritan Haven**  
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My name is Julie Bond, I am the Co-Executive Director of Good Samaritan Haven, a shelter network for the unhoused that serves Washington county and the broader central Vermont region.

You've asked us to address several specific questions regarding the crisis in homelessness and the administration's response to it. We are not advocacy experts - we operate an emergency shelter and services program. So it's most appropriate for us to describe our experience, the situation in Washington County and share some insights for responding to homelessness.

To begin, Good Samaritan Haven is a non-profit organization that provides emergency shelter beds and support services to individuals experiencing homelessness. We operate four shelter facilities with an overall capacity of 82 adult individuals - we only work with families on an incidental basis and through their connection with our shelter guests. In addition to our shelter based program, we have a housing navigation team on-site at the Hilltop Inn, which is the largest capacity motel participating in the GA Program in Washington County. Also, in order to connect with and assist a growing population of unsheltered individuals, we operate a street outreach team of 3.5 FTEs. Altogether, Good Sam employs over 46 people in this challenging work.

An intentional and, we think, very important feature of our program is that it functions as a continuum or network of shelters and services for the unhoused. Our street outreach team engages with the unsheltered in myriad settings by providing the basic supplies, services and building connections. Our shelters provide a range of access from a very low barrier seasonal congregate shelter in Montpelier to a low barrier congregate shelter in Barre to semi-private rooms in the Welcome Center shelter in Berlin to semi-private rooms in a Substance Abuse Recovery Oriented Shelter in the Town of Barre. Our motel staff facilitates movement between the motels, our shelters and sometimes out to other options. Finally, our Housing Navigation and Case Management Team helps our guests obtain what they need whether it be documents, health care, training and education, transportation, employment or affordable housing.

In our experience, one size does not fit all in assisting the unhoused. Our guest population is incredibly diverse. We serve an adult population fairly evenly distributed by age, but with an increasing number of older persons. There are many persons impacted by mental or physical or intellectual conditions - most often moderately but sometimes profoundly. Alcohol and drug overuse are constant challenges to stability but there are many who are in recovery or do not use substances at all. Many have impacts related to involvement with the correctional system. Most have very limited or no income at all. Overarching all is an extremely tight housing market with few low cost options.

Our system isn't perfect. We're still building it and the skilled workforce it requires. Nevertheless, it provides different points of connection and continuity of service under one case management team.

In our experience, a range of options and a high degree of coordination is exactly what's needed to address homelessness. You would think that we have such a rich array of social service organizations that coordinated provision of services for the unsheltered between agencies and systems of care could routinely occur. In our experience that's not necessarily the case - successful coordination sometimes occurs, but it's almost never routine when it does and in some cases it doesn't at all. For those who do not succeed in other systems of care - health care, mental health, corrections, affordable housing etc the default option is the shelter system.

Thus, our overriding recommendation for the State's response to the homelessness crisis, whether we provide 200 more shelter beds or 1000, is to provide a range of emergency shelter options and a better integration of services than what exists. In some cases the options and services need to be on a regional basis; some more specialized shelter settings and services should be provided on a statewide basis.

Now to the numbers. Do we need more shelter beds?

Focusing on Washington county, we compared the number of actual shelter beds with the projected level of homelessness based on the average rate of

homelessness in Vermont as determined by the Point In Time Count in 2023. That rate is 51 people homeless per 10,000 population.

First let's look at the need or demand. Applying the statewide rate to Washington County would be roughly 300 people. In fact, we know the actual number to be higher – by our own count of July 1, 2023 there were actually 305 households, or 386 people experiencing homelessness in Washington County. Even that figure undercounts a significant number of unsheltered individuals who are difficult to find.

In terms of supply, there are 108 emergency shelter beds or apartments in the county including 82 with Good Sam and 27 with a number of other programs. This includes a small number of options for families.

Compared to our projection of 300 that leaves a gap of almost 200 beds in Washington County alone without the availability of the motel based emergency housing program.

So our data and our experience suggests that the answer is “yes” more emergency shelter options are needed and that the motel program probably needs to be continued at some level.

Our own top priorities for shelter options needed in Washington County and perhaps in other parts of the state are (1) very low barrier shelter options to house a growing unsheltered population and (2) emergency shelter for persons who need support around their healthcare needs.

One thing we've all learned over the last year is that it's not that easy to create a dignified and effective emergency shelter program. No matter what the number of shelter beds we capitalize there will be challenges operationalizing them including a lack of willing and capable operators, community resistance to shelter siting, and the engagement of public safety partners in keeping shelters safe. We think DCF has made a good faith effort to provide more shelter beds over the last year but now, once again, we face an unfolding crisis of vulnerable people on the streets.

These challenges are significant but they can be addressed with a holistic strategy and commitment to it. We look forward to working with the State of Vermont and our community partners toward that goal.