Emergency Housing Council/Network Call re: COVID-19 response
3/17/2020

Commissioner Hanford greeted participants – in the interest of time, no roll call was taken.

DHCD Leadership has been in communication with the Governor’s office and State Emergency Operations Center around several concerns. The SEOC is issuing daily briefs about deliberations. The group has been discussing mobilizing community homeless response teams through Dept. of Health as well as options for provision of General Assistance Motel vouchers and other plans to reduce the density of clients in our homeless shelters.

The SEOC is currently in the “Response” phase of emergency operations plans, dealing with initial containment and addressing immediate needs. DHCD is typically considered part of the “Recovery” phase, but it was made clear during the conversation that considering the nature of this pandemic and the need for social distancing, housing needs should be considered in the emergency response. This is especially true if vacant units or building purchases are to be considered as a means to increase shelter capacities.

Representatives from the Vermont Congressional delegation provided some updates. Approximately $4.9 million was passed for Vermont’s Dept of Health response efforts. Leahy’s office has been involved in discussions regarding as-yet-unpassed proposals for housing assistance and a larger stimulus bill that is being crafted. Sanders’ staff has also been developing their budget requests and has been closely following the needs of Meals on Wheels and other home meal delivery programs. Home delivered meals are a significant concern for the administrators of our senior housing facilities as well. Welch’s office is also seeking information from shelter providers about plans of ongoing operations in order to best respond to constituent inquiries.

The delegation was urged to consider the proposals put together by the National Low Income Housing Coalition.

A call was made for significant increases in Emergency Solution Grant and other funding to the Continua of Care to address the immediate needs of homeless shelters. This should include funds to perform deep cleaning.

There have been discussions about a moratorium on payment-related evictions for those whose ability to pay rent is affected by COVID-19 response. This is an issue for both tenants who face housing instability as well as landlords – both for-profit and non-profit – for whom restricted cash flow could inhibit ability to pay property managers, maintenance staff and otherwise maintain buildings. Conversations about how relief could be administered have begun at the Governor’s office.

Maintenance tasks in our non-profit owned housing projects has largely been limited to emergency maintenance and a heavy emphasis on decontaminating communal areas. Many are struggling with maintaining daily operations while enacting social distancing practices and particularly addressing policies for visitors. While the concern is not yet state-wide, there are concerns about dwindling cleaning supplies – this issue will grow over time and may require a concerted response effort in the coming weeks. Staffing concerns were also raised, particularly amidst the specter of increased COVID cases among staff.
For HUD contract housing, there are worries about the ability of staff to provide recertification materials in a timely fashion. These require inspections and interactions with tenants that are against the best practices in place. A delay in deadlines for recertifications should be requested of HUD.

Mobile Home Park residents were noted as a particularly vulnerable population. These residents should be considered when municipalities and State agencies are enacting emergency plans – especially when it comes to home meal delivery and the provision of other necessary supplies. Additionally, consideration should be given to efforts that might alleviate tight cash flows in mobile home parks – specifically loan payment deferrals for existing State loans like those administered by ANR.

Several concerns regarding HIPAA and medical information were raised surrounding positive COVID patients being released for home quarantine within multi-family housing properties. This is a delicate balance between maintaining patient and tenant privacy and awareness of cases of infection within properties. There is currently not clear guidance on how such instances will be dealt with and additional information should be developed in the coming days about how information about cases of infection can be relayed to managers of properties with vulnerable populations.

Looking forward, there are growing concerns about the slowdown of housing construction projects. Not only will this have negative effects on future home unit pipelines but may affect the ability of our development network to remain solvent.

It is very clear that there is a great need to establish regular communication channels. DHCD will be working internally and with AHS over the coming days to establish protocols for updates. This will likely include weekly conference calls as well as more frequent e-mail communication. A suggestion was made to set up a “Google Sheets” platform where information on regional responses and resources could be crowdsourced. DHCD will look into this and other methods of information dissemination in the coming days. The Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness has been posting information on their website: www.helpingtohousevt.org visit that site for more information and to sign up for a regular COVID-19 newsletter. Office of Economic Opportunity is also hosting a weekly call on Monday at 3pm to update shelter providers.