

County housing coalition seeks towns' support

By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — A group of local advocates is engaged in efforts to improve housing opportunities and health care access for houseless individuals and families in Addison County.

Those efforts — separate but running a long parallel tracks — are being pursued by the Addison County Housing Coalition, a partnership of 12 local service providers and affordable housing

developers in our area. The coalition's mission is to prevent people within the community from becoming homeless and to find ways to end homelessness.

The first effort involves raising \$150,000 to help the coalition's member-organizations respond to an explosion of affordable housing demands that became more acute during the COVID-19 pandemic. For a little perspective: The Addison County Community Trust (ACCT) — the county's largest affordable housing provider — currently has a waiting list of 159 families currently seeking a place to call home.

And things are about to get worse, according to ACCT Executive Director Elise Shanbacker. The Vermont Emergency Rental Assistance Program (VERAP), which has provided Vermonters with critical subsidies through the pandemic, sunsetted with little notice earlier this week. Approximately 50 ACCT tenants had been depending on VERAP subsidies to make rent.

Coalition officials are hoping to raise \$150,000 in housing assistance money by asking each Addison

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— From the
Addison
County Housing
Coalition

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County town for a small slice of the American Rescue Plan Act grants they received during the pandemic. Addison County's 23 towns have received a combined \$10,993,603 in ARPA money to invest in their respective communities as part of the COVID-19 pandemic recovery effort.

The federal government prorated each community's grant based on its population.

Several of the county's communities have established special website addresses and email accounts to receive feedback from citizens on how their ARPA windfalls should be used.

A couple of local nonprofits — John Graham Housing & Services and the Turning Point Center of Addison County — both made individual pitches late last year for a cut of the towns' ARPA funding for capital projects to allow them to better serve their constituencies. When JGHS Executive Director Susan Whitmore conveyed this news to her housing coalition colleagues, they decided to make an appeal for some of the ARPA money to more broadly help people experiencing homelessness as well as help those at risk of losing their home.

So this past summer, the coalition made a formal pitch for ARPA funding from all Addison County towns.

"Our member agencies have not been immune to challenges related to supply chain, workforce, and higher costs of doing business," the coalition's appeal letter states. "They have navigated these challenges while also meeting the increased demand for emergency shelter, rapid rehousing, support for those housed in the motel program, and coordinated entry into affordable housing. This increased demand, coupled with a lack of affordable housing units across the state, required many housing agencies to hire additional staff to meet the needs of our emergency shelter guests and housing services clients. This is why we need your help. A relatively small infusion of ARPA funding from your town will have a big impact on our collective ability to address the housing challenges facing our communities."

The coalition is making specific requests of each town based on their population. For example, Middlebury — the county's most populated town — is being asked for \$36,000, while smaller towns like Goshen and Waltham are being asked for \$1,500.

Plans call for any ARPA contributions to be distributed equally among the coalition's 13 member organizations to help them absorb the additional costs of advocating for, and working with, homeless clients.

"Everyone in the coalition is a housing services provider, so we share a common mission — to address homelessness, but also housing affordability issues," Whitmore said.

As of this writing, only the town of Panton had agreed to the coalition's ask, in its case for \$3,000. The coalition recently asked the other county communities to again consider the funding request at their annual town meetings next March.

"We hope the towns will be interested in being part of the solution," Whitmore said. "What we've found is that most of the towns, to date, are allocating to (local) infrastructure and broadband, which we definitely understand are needs in many of the towns — especially in rural communities.

"Our request is relatively small, compared to their overall (ARPA) allocations, so we're hoping a bit of that can go to social services," she added.

Coalition members will offer to testify at area town meetings about the importance of the ARPA funding request.

"I think we're optimistic," said coalition Chair Heidi Lacey, who's also executive director of the Charter House Coalition Emergency Shelter in Middlebury. "We're certainly hoping for the opportunity to at least advocate and present (our case). That would be helpful for the entire cause."

While ARPA contributions have been slow to materialize for the coalition, the group was pleased to report that it been awarded a Homeless Health Equity Grant of \$85,000 through the Vermont Department of Health. United Way of Addison County Executive Director (and coalition member) Helena Van Voorst and Whitmore spearheaded the successful application for the money, which will be used to find ways to improve homeless persons' access to health care services — and health care outcomes for the homeless population — in our area.

Officials stressed this \$85,000 grant is for devising a health care access plan; it will then be up to the state to help the county implement the plan. And if it proves effective, advocates believe it could be launched in other regions of the state to ensure that homelessness doesn't present a barrier to *any* Vermonters getting the health care services they need.

Coalition members stressed none of the \$85,000 can be used as part of the housing services funding the group is seeking through ARPA gifts from the towns.

"It's about improving the systems that connect people to primary care providers, substance use disorder treatment and mental health services," Van Voorst explained.

She said a separate local entity will steer the health equity planning effort: The Addison County Homeless Health Equity Alliance, which includes representatives from various local human services organizations. The alliance will reach out to area health care entities — including Porter Medical Center — as part of the process, which must yield a plan by next May, according to the conditions of the grant.

"(The alliance) is in research mode right now," Van Voorst said. "We're gathering information, talking to partners and people with lived experience."

Whitmore stressed the importance of getting homeless persons assigned to prime care physicians as a means of monitoring people's health and flagging health care problems before they become serious.

"That would be a huge win," she said.