

—Slug:.....COMM-0855.opin.view.chapman
—Contributor.....Laura Chapman
—Contributor email.....llchapman@yahoo.com
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Notes from editor (not for publication):



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 When governance decides who sleeps inside

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 For unhoused Vermonters, emergency shelter is
3 budgeted. Need is prevalent. Rooms are physically available. Yet
4 they are being sent hours away from their providers, recovery
5 networks, and community.

####END SUBHED####

6 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

7 THERE ARE empty rooms while people are sleeping
8 outside.

9 Vermont's General Assistance Emergency Housing
10 program, commonly known as the motel voucher program, is
11 administered by the Vermont Agency of Human Services through

12 the Department for Children and Families' Economic Services
13 Division. The program provides temporary shelter to people
14 experiencing homelessness when no other safe housing options
15 are available.

16 It pays participating motels directly with state funds,
17 particularly during the winter months, to prevent people from
18 sleeping outside in dangerous conditions.

19 In fall 2025, a local case manager told me something
20 that stopped me cold. They believed that motel rooms in
21 Brattleboro were being restricted. Not because vouchers had run
22 out. Not because motels were full.

23 Rooms existed. Funding existed. The statewide cap had
24 not been met.

25 Yet people from Brattleboro who were experiencing
26 homelessness, many medically fragile, were being told there was
27 no availability in town and were instead sent hours away from
28 their providers, recovery networks, and community. For someone
29 fighting addiction, managing mental illness, or navigating chronic
30 health conditions, that kind of displacement can undo months or
31 years of fragile stability.

32 A few months later, on one of our colder winter days,
33 when statewide restrictions were supposed to be fully lifted, a
34 local social worker described the same pattern. Some of their
35 most vulnerable clients were being placed outside the
36 community because there "weren't rooms."

37 In a small town, people talk. They knew motel managers
38 who said they had space.

39 On paper, the state had funds to pay. Still, placements
40 were being diverted and, in some cases, not happening at all.

41 * * *

42 AS I COMPARED notes with a variety of colleagues and
43 community members experiencing homelessness throughout
44 Vermont and examined public records, it became evident that
45 these were not isolated incidents.

46 A review of reporting dates between December 2024
47 and January 2026 shows that during the coldest months, while
48 statewide winter motel voucher use declined by approximately
49 9%, Brattleboro's winter motel voucher use declined by nearly
50 59%.

51 On Jan. 13, 2025, Brattleboro listed 242 rooms housing
52 235 households. On Jan. 19, 2026, it listed 100 rooms housing
53 96 households. These figures reflect two single days in mid-
54 January for both years, but the scale of the difference exceeds
55 normal weekly fluctuations and merits explanation.

56 Need did not fall by 59%. It rose. Vermont's 2025
57 homelessness data showed record levels, with agencies statewide
58 reporting that they were serving upwards of 4,600 people.

59 On Jan. 28, during subzero temperatures, Groundworks
60 Collaborative's outreach team reported 50 individuals sleeping
61 unsheltered in Brattleboro.

62 At the same time, motel voucher funding was reported as
63 underspent. On Jan. 15, during House Appropriations testimony,
64 Rep. Theresa Wood, chair of the House Committee on Human
65 Services, stated that the General Assistance emergency housing
66 line item was projected to underspend between \$5.5 and 8
67 million.

68 Shelter is budgeted. Need is prevalent. Rooms are
69 physically available. Yet room utilization and spending have
70 slowed significantly.

71 This is not surprising when you look at the motel lists
72 and see directives such as "no new placements at request of
73 municipality," with Brattleboro motels having some form of
74 limitations set on all but one participating motel in December.

75 Brattleboro is not alone. Similar municipal caps and
76 requests appeared in Barre, Rutland, Bellows Falls, and other
77 districts.

78 * * *

79 I RAISED CONCERNS about the limited number of motel
80 rooms with the Brattleboro Selectboard multiple times. On Jan. 6,

81 I asked during a public meeting and received no answer. On Jan.
82 17, I followed up by email with one board member and received
83 no response.

84 More than a month later, I asked again at the Feb. 17
85 meeting and was told it would be discussed at another time.
86 Selectboard member Isaac Evans-Frantz requested additional
87 information, but the discussion did not move forward.

88 During the same period, the Selectboard voted on
89 zoning changes that could affect where services can operate,
90 eliminated municipal funding for social service organizations,
91 and enacted a camping ordinance that does not provide public
92 space or consistent 24-hour bathroom access for people who
93 must remain outdoors.

94 Each decision alone warrants debate. Taken together,
95 they narrow the options available to people trying to survive
96 homelessness.

97 If the goal is cost containment, shifting people from
98 motel rooms does not achieve it. If the goal is to reduce visible
99 homelessness, exporting placements does not solve it.

100 The strain has not disappeared. It has shifted.

101 Mutual aid networks are scrambling to arrange
102 transportation to distant motels before check-in deadlines.
103 Hospitals report people seeking overnight refuge in emergency
104 departments. Case workers report individuals declining distant
105 placements rather than facing the stark isolation and unknowns
106 of leaving their community.

107 Some report their agencies or mutual aid networks
108 paying for motel rooms when ESD reported none were available.
109 These are individual community members and smaller nonprofits
110 spending finite resources on something the state has already
111 funded.

112 * * *

113 THERE ARE, of course, some legitimate reasons behind
114 some municipal requests. Public health concerns, staffing
115 capacity, and coordination challenges are real. But when

116 restrictions affect access to shelter during extreme weather, the
117 reasons and process should be clear to those impacted and their
118 advocates.

119 What gives me pause is that I'm hearing from people
120 within these systems who do not feel these questions are being
121 openly addressed. When elected officials, front-line providers,
122 and the people they serve lack clarity about system restrictions
123 and decision-making processes, this creates confusion,
124 undermines stability, and makes achieving positive outcomes
125 harder.

126 If rooms are capped by municipal request, how are those
127 decisions reviewed? What criteria are used? What outcomes are
128 measured? Why are elected officials, social workers, and people
129 experiencing homelessness left guessing about the reasons?

130 And how can individuals or organizations appeal being
131 declined or displaced if they are unaware that rooms are
132 available but administratively restricted?

133 These questions are not about blame. They are about
134 transparency, process, and oversight when municipal requests
135 directly affect a person's ability to access funded shelter. These
136 questions are intended to encourage clearer communication and
137 fuller use of available shelter resources while winter conditions
138 persist.

139 If rooms are available and fully funded by the state, what
140 process guides municipal influence over access during extreme
141 weather, and how are the human impacts of those decisions
142 assessed?

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

143 **LAURA CHAPMAN** is a civic volunteer, social justice
144 activist, and works with human-services nonprofits that help
145 neighbors in need.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:

146 ####BEGIN MAXISSUE####
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 ####END MAXISSUE####

LINKS:

147 ####BEGIN LINKS####

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VIDEO:

148 ####BEGIN VIDEO####

 ####END VIDEO####

LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

149 ####BEGIN LOGLINE####

 ####END LOGLINE####