



May 5, 2023

Rising to the Challenge...

An Open Letter to Our Valued Partners,

In March 2020, the pandemic caught everyone off guard, upending our lives and our businesses. During this same time, the Vermont State Housing Authority (VSHA) stood up massive rental relief initiatives in a matter of weeks. Time did not allow for consideration of best practices to get it perfect. Vermonters needed assistance and our job was to deploy funds quickly for housing stability. The Cares-funded Rental Housing Stabilization Program provided \$25,000,000 in rental arrearage benefits to tenants and landlords. The Vermont Emergency Rental Assistance Program (VERAP), provided rental and utility benefits to approximately 17,398 households totaling more than \$177,984,254 in assistance. VERAP will sunset 6/30/23.

The Stay-at-Home order forced VSHA to contemplate how we would accomplish our mission work of providing rental assistance to over 8,500 Vermont households. As a boots-on-the-ground housing organization, we work one-on-one with the people we serve. The early months of the Public Health Emergency did not allow for in-person visits and meetings. Like all of you, we figured it out. Working via Teams, Zoom, remote video inspections, and cloud-based software allowed staff to work from home. Although these same restrictions are no longer in-place, as an organization we evolved and adopted many efficiencies learned, such as hybrid work models and the continued use of electronic platforms for meetings.

During this three-year period, VSHA was impacted by the national “Mass Resignation,” with 29 out of a staff of 70, retiring or leaving their positions. This coupled with the “worker shortage” made it difficult to hire new staff. Like many of you, we are in the people business – we need people to serve people.

I am humbled and proud of the performance and commitment of our staff. I am proud of all that VSHA has accomplished, and continues to accomplish, to meet the ever-changing needs of low-income Vermonters.

Furthermore, we could not have done any of it without your enduring support and partnerships, as well as your patience and understanding during these past few years as we rise to meet new challenges.

As a new Executive Director, with a two-year tenure at the helm, I share my commitments for becoming a stronger organization and partner:

1. VSHA will aggressively apply for additional rental assistance to assist low-income Vermonters.
2. VSHA will advocate loudly for the creation of a rent arrearage program.
3. VSHA will actively encourage the continuation of the renter risk pool program, the Landlord Relief Program.

4. VSHA will strategically search for solutions to expand our Project-Based Voucher initiative.
5. VSHA will continue to provide high quality, responsive customer service.
6. VSHA will ensure our staff are highly trained, professional and have the skill set to do their jobs well.
7. VSHA will continue to modernize operations through technology and organizational changes.
8. VSHA will provide an updated, intuitive, and resourceful website.

Consistent with our commitments, and with a desire to provide the best customer service possible, we are deploying an easy-to-use secure applicant-tenant/landlord portal for the transfer of information, including project based (PBV) funded properties. This initiative will be rolled out in three phases, with the first phase scheduled to launch in late May.

Our vision is that this website will be a one-stop shop for applicants applying for housing assistance and searching for housing, including a place where landlords can post vacancies and allow PBV-assisted property managers to add and remove applications for their sites. There will be more information coming soon on this initiative.

The VSHA is committed to helping Vermonters find affordable rental and homeownership opportunities and you play a vital role in assuring these needs are met. Thank you again for your enduring support.

Sincerely,



Kathleen R. Berk, Executive Director
Vermont State Housing Authority

