

**VERMONT STATE HOUSING AUTHORITY  
PUBLIC HEARING AND REGULAR MEETING MINUTES  
12 JULY 2023**

**PUBLIC HEARING**

**1. Roll Call**

The Public Hearing of the Board of Commissioners of the Vermont State Housing Authority was held remotely via Zoom. The meeting was called to order at 11:01 a.m. by Chair Alex Farrell; and upon roll call, the following Commissioners answered present: Cory Richardson; Vice Chair, Chris Trombley, Caryn Feinberg, and Linda Joy Sullivan. Absent: Jo Ann Troiano and Aaron Jones.

Staff present: Kathleen Berk, Executive Director/Secretary; Kelly Pembroke, Director of Finance & Information Systems; Ellen Danahy Liptak, Director of HR & Administration; Kelli Robinson, Director of Housing Program Administration; Matt Baron, Union Representative; and Robert Abbott, Office Services Coordinator.

Members of the Public: Foresta Castaneda, Transitional Housing Coordinator of WomenSafe; Elise Shanbacker of Addison Trust (joined at 11:33am); Rikki Risatti of the Brattleboro Intercultural Committee.

**2. Comments and Discussion: VSHA's Section 8 Annual Plan and Administrative Plan Amendments including Annual Plan Challenged Elements (written public comments)**

Berk began by stating the purpose of the Public Hearing. This meeting, as a part of VSHA's strategic planning process, was to hear comments and answer concerns from the public on the proposed FY 2024 Annual Budget.

Robinson gave an overview of the Annual Plan. She highlighted all the positive work done by the agency in order to meet the goals and benchmarks set forth in the previous 5-year plan. Robinson's department currently administers 4,425 Section 8 and Mainstream program vouchers, stating that this portfolio is the largest within the state of Vermont. The proposed plan highlights and provides updates on the following elements:

- Housing needs and a strategy for addressing housing needs within our community
- Deconcentration and other policies that govern eligibilities, selection, and admissions
- Financial resources of the agency and the Housing Assistance Administration Department
- Update on the Self-Sufficiency programs
- Treatment of income changes resulting from welfare
- Progress report

Robinson responded to a few of the comments that were provided during the 45-day comment period that had touched on a variety of elements.

- The Agency continues to play a critical role in any homelessness throughout the state by making reasonable efforts to address the needs of low-income families through collaborative partnerships.
- From 01 October 2022 through today, VSHA has admitted 130 homeless families into the Section 8 Program, which equates to about 30-35% of all newly admitted families.
- Of families served, 1403 are non-elderly/disabled individuals, while 876 are elderly/disabled. This equals approximately 33% of the overall portfolio.
- The lack of available housing continues to greatly impact the success rate of our program. Due to this, VSHA is nearly at the cap for vouchers that can be project-based. VSHA is able to project-base 30% of the total voucher units that have been allocated. This makes collaborative efforts with other housing partners even more critical.
- The department continues to work through staffing shortages, which has challenged VSHA to think critically about how to maintain high-quality, responsive customer service. Despite the staffing challenges, Robinson pointed out that there have been advancements in the technology used to administer services. For example, the applicant/participant/and landlord portals along with regular updates to existing Administrative Plans have given greater access to services for clients and stakeholders.
- Robinson said there have been a few comments surrounding the housing instability preference and the desire to reinstitute the domestic violence transitional housing preference. To answer these inquiries, Robinson stated that survivors of domestic violence could fall into the housing instability preference through certain criteria. She mentioned that this criterion is not specific to only survivors.

Castaneda spoke on behalf of WomenSafe, stating that they were concerned with the discontinued domestic violence survivor preference. She felt that it offered a longer-term for rental assistance while in transitional housing, of six months to two years. She thinks that it might be less clear to advocates and survivors that they fit into the housing instability preference. She asked if the language could be adjusted to clarify who meets the criteria of the housing instability preference.

Castaneda then read the following statement, "Our program is primarily scattered site, which means that we rely on third-party, mostly private landlords, who are willing to lease up survivors with financial backing from WomenSafe, for all or part of the rent from six months up to two years. Many of the survivors who come to us, come with little or no income, or fixed income such as Reach Up or Social Security Disability. These vouchers are necessary for survivors to be able to afford housing on their own, and transition off domestic violence programs transition housing funding. Most landlords that we work with, through traditionally housed survivors, are willing to work with and continue housing the survivor after our funding ends as long as things have been going well and they are assured

the rent continues to get paid. And so, what the transitional housing preference has been able to do for our program prior to now is that it supported many survivors to be able to basically transition in place. Instead of having to move again to find new housing with a voucher, they could remain in the same apartment that we were able to work with them to be able to get under the transitional program as a matter of shifting the funding to the permanent voucher.”

Robinson agreed that she can likely provide the necessary clarity in the preference policies so that all those reading it are aware that as long as they meet the criteria, they can apply with that preference status. Robinson also clarified the waiting lists, stating that all waiting lists for tenant-based vouchers remain closed. The only waiting lists that are open are for the project-based vouchers. If the waiting lists for the tenant-based vouchers were to ever open, Robinson stated that a public notice would be posted to our website, emailed to community partners, and advertised in local newspapers. The number of vouchers that could be issued is dependent on the available funding. Other factors would be the number of points applied to that preference and the date/time of the application.

Farrell clarified that members of the public were welcome to voice their concerns during this period, but that the Commissioners would wait until agenda item #7 of the Regular Meeting before they discuss and vote on the annual plan.

Risatti brought forth a series of issues and concerns to include the matter in which the public hearing and board meeting are warned, the use of the Section 8 Participant Portal for recertification process, recertification packets having only binary gender options, questions surrounding the maximum and retroactive medical subsidization, and if VSHA subsidizes tiny homes built by Vermont companies. It was agreed that Robinson would reach out to Risatti after the meeting with answers to those questions.

Shanbacker thanked the board for holding the hearing and stated that she would send an email regarding some of her other questions.

3. Farrell closed the Public Hearing at 11:36am with no action taken.

## **Regular Meeting**

### **1. Roll Call**

The Regular Meeting of the Board of Commissioners of the Vermont State Housing Authority was held remotely via Zoom. The meeting was called to order at 11:37 a.m. by Chair Alex Farrell; and upon roll call, the following Commissioners answered present: Cory Richardson; Vice Chair, Chris Trombley, Caryn Feinberg, and Linda Joy Sullivan. Absent: Jo Ann Troiano and Aaron Jones.

Staff present: Kathleen Berk, Executive Director/Secretary; Kelly Pembroke, Director of Finance & Information Systems; Ellen Danahy Liptak, Director of HR & Administration; Kelli

Robinson, Director of Housing Program Administration; Susan Kuegel, Director of Property and Asset Management (joined at 12:04); Matt Baron, Union Representative; and Robert Abbott, Office Services Coordinator. Susan Kuegel, Director of Property & Asset Management, joined at 12:09 p.m.

Members of the Public: Rikki Risatti of the Brattleboro Intercultural Committee.

## **2. Meeting Agenda**

There were no changes to the meeting agenda.

## **3. Public Participation**

Risatti remained for the Regular Meeting but did not offer any comment at this time.

## **4. Approval of Minutes**

- A motion was made by Richardson to approve the minutes from the 24 May 2023 Regular Meeting and the 9 June 2023 Special Meeting. The motion was seconded by Trombly. The vote passed unanimously.

## **5. Secretary's Report**

Berk started by updating the board as to the status of the VSHA portfolio following the storm and floods of the previous couple days. She mentioned that the properties received minimal damage, although there were two properties in Northfield that were evacuated. Common damages being reported include basements flooding, debris washed into lawns, erosion of roads, but no significant damage to infrastructure. Riverside Mobile Home Park received a lot of destruction in Tropical Storm Irene, but this time was not impacted in the same way. Berk also mentioned some staff members that were significantly impacted by the storm. The annual picnic was canceled, and those hours were repurposed to allow employees to assist with clean-up volunteer opportunities within our properties and their communities.

Berk also mentioned that in the recent House Appropriation Bill that was passed included H171, which was a \$4 million appropriation from VHCB to VSHA to expand the Manufacture Home Improvement and Repair Program. One of the criteria to receive this funding is that the \$4 million go to preventing homelessness.

Berk then said that VSHA will be applying to VHFA for missing middle funds for home ownership for infill within our mobile home parks. VHCB has invited VSHA to apply to expand the existing pilot for rental infill, with a number of those infills being dedicated to homeless households. The exact number of lots is still being decided. HFI currently has 70 vacant lots in their mobile home parks, and it is specifically those lots that are being targeted for these initiatives.

- Trombly made the motion to accept the Secretary's Report. The motion was seconded by Feinberg. The Board voted unanimously to accept the report.

## 6. Finance and Information Systems

Pembroke provided insight into the recent financials. She stated that VSHA is slightly behind where they were at this time last year, and she expects that to be consistent for the remainder of this fiscal year.

The newly renovated parking lot located at the main office suffered a 5'x30' crater due to the recent flooding.

Pembroke emphasized that VSHA is maintaining a 97% proration rate, which is above the 89% that VSHA received last year. The last payment for the VERAP program will be going out in the near future, and that will officially end the VERAP Program. Despite the end of the program, Pembroke feels it is important to keep those statistics on the following reports to include transparency on nearly \$30 million that was spent on the program.

Pembroke plans to include the 2024 budget at the next board meeting. She believes the increases in rent will have a significant impact on the HAP numbers for the future budget. Pembroke clarified that the administration fees for VERAP will go away, however the employees that were used for that program have transferred to other programs, so there was no loss of staff due to the program ending.

- The motion to accept the financial report was initiated by Richardson and seconded by Trombly. The document was unanimously accepted by the Board.

Pembroke went on to cover the consolidated financial statement for 13 Mobile Home Parks that were recently acquired from HFI. She noted that those parks were performing very well, which would leave money available for emergency repairs if something was to happen. It also provides the opportunity to address some of the infrastructure repairs that are needed. Collections are stable and comparable to pre-VERAP.

- The motion to accept the consolidated mobile home park financials was initiated by Feinberg and seconded by Trombly. The document was unanimously accepted by the Board.

Pembroke updated the board on information and technology. Regarding cyber security, the new company provides scans of the system which she discusses with the network administrator and vendor. VSHA received a score of 85. For perspective, 75 is the minimum insurable score. A high score also equates to a lower insurance cost. The transition from a server-based system to a cloud-based system will reduce the level of risk.

## 7. Housing Program Administration

Robinson provided the Board with the current voucher utilization statistics. She referred to Agenda Item 7b while stating there are 3,606 active families receiving subsidies and 405 families enrolled in the mainstream program. She provided insight into HUD's plan with Emergency Housing Vouchers as it pertains to Castaneda's concerns during the public hearing. Currently, HUD intends to end the EHV program 30 September 2023 and as families come off that program, to shelf those vouchers for use in the upcoming years. VSHA was allocated 99 Emergency Housing Vouchers, with 50 actively being used and 26 families that are searching. Robinson stated that of all the units available under the Project-Based Voucher program, there are 216 that are not receiving a subsidy. Reasons for not providing a subsidy to a unit include vacancy or families that are no longer eligible for housing assistance but continue to live in the unit.

The Affordablehousing.com team continues to process the backlog of applications for Section 8 assistance. Robinson then took a moment to recognize the hard work of the field staff and her department as a whole.

With regard to the proposed Annual Plan, Robinson clarified that the language can be adjusted to better incorporate those that would be seeking an EHV to ensure they understand that they are eligible for the housing instability preference. Robinson then highlighted items from the progress report section. At the beginning of the year, VSHA was allocated an additional 22 vouchers known as Fair Share Housing Vouchers. Recently, VSHA was also awarded an additional 22 Stability Vouchers. These vouchers will launch on 1 October and will require coordination with community partners and coordinated entry. Family Unification Vouchers could be used by survivors of domestic violence with small children to transition from temporary housing assistance to permanent housing assistance. To increase the utilization of the mainstream vouchers, VSHA launched the Landlord Incentive Program. To date, VSHA has paid \$8,750 to landlords who participate in the program. This resulted in the recruitment of 7 new landlords and retaining 6 additional landlords.

Risatti asked if VSHA is able to lobby for rent control to fight the inflation of rental costs throughout the state. To which Berk clarified that HUD rules prevent VSHA from lobbying.

Brief discussion was had surrounding the Landlord Relief Program. The Agency of Human Services, Office of Economic Opportunity takes the lead on policy development, while VSHA heads up the administration. To date, approximately \$310,000 has been paid out through this program.

Farrell read the following resolution:

**"NOW THEREFORE, be it resolved that the Vermont State Housing Authority Board of Commissioners accepts the PHA Annual Plan for Fiscal Year 2024 (October 1, 2023-September 30, 2024) including the PHA Certifications of compliance with the PHA Plan and**

related regulations, as presented, and authorizes the Chairman to sign the certifications and approve submission of the PHA Annual Plan for 2024.”

- The motion to approve the resolution was initiated by Trombly and seconded by Feinberg. The Annual Plan was approved unanimously.

## **8. Property and Asset Management**

Kuegel briefed the board as to the status of VSHA properties. School Street Apartments suffered some minor water damage in the basement. Mobile Acres in Braintree lost power for a few hours, and it has since been restored. Hilltop is under a boil water notice, as is Colonial Manor. Riverside Mobile Home Park received the worst of the damage, which includes water damage to the skirting. She praised Tom Young for shutting down the pumps before the flooding, which prevented them from sucking in dirt and debris which would have burned them out. Approximately 5 feet of riverbank was lost and VSHA will have to work with state engineers on correcting that issue. Small amounts of road damage throughout the parks are being fixed currently and being documented by Tom Young for insurance purposes. Residents that were evacuated are slowly returning to their homes.

Berk praised members of the P&AM department for the actions that they took during the flood to preserve homes as much as they did, along with Bethany Lunn and her husband and Melisa Begovic and her son, for the work they did on the main office building in Montpelier.

Kuegel mentioned new incentives that are in the works, to include a “Missing Middle” program and a tax credit application with VHFA. VSHA is also working with VSCB to expand the infill program for homeless.

## **9. Other Business**

15 September 2023 is locked in as the date for the second day of the Board Retreat. This day will be used to continue strategic planning. The location is yet to be determined. All management staff will be invited to join, and stakeholder surveys will be reviewed.

## **10. Executive Session**

Farrell read the following resolution.

“I invite a motion that the Board adopt the following Resolution: WHEREAS the Board needs to discuss contractual relationships and employee matters and WHEARAS premature general public knowledge would clearly put the Authority at a substantial disadvantage; NOW THEREFORE, the Board shall discuss the contractual relationships and employee matters at issue in Executive Session.”

- The motion was made by Richardson and seconded by Feinberg. The motion to move to Executive Session passed unanimously.

The Board moved into Executive Session at 12:34pm. All exited the meeting except for Board members, Berk, Pembroke, and Liptak.

➤ The Board came out of Executive Session on a motion by Richardson and seconded by Trombly. The motion was approved unanimously. No action was taken.

**11. Adjourn.**

The meeting was adjourned at 12:36pm.

Respectfully submitted,



Kathleen Berk  
Executive Director/Secretary

/RTA

