

OVERVIEW

Homelessness is an increasingly urgent issue in New Hampshire and Vermont, ranking as a top priority in the Upper Valley Community Health Needs Assessment. With rising housing costs, a shortage of affordable housing, and the expiration of pandemic-era assistance programs, more individuals are experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Policies that criminalize camping in public spaces or sleeping in vehicles disproportionately impact those unable to secure stable housing, exacerbating public health and safety concerns.

In response to a 2024 US Supreme Court ruling granting municipalities the authority to ban sleeping and camping in public places, both New Hampshire and Vermont have seen shifts in their legislative approaches to homelessness. Understanding these legislative trends is essential for evaluating their impact on individuals experiencing homelessness and identifying opportunities for policy intervention.

- New Hampshire has strengthened enforcement against public camping.
- Vermont has focused on expanding emergency shelter programs and exploring long-term housing solutions.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- Between 2019 and 2022, the number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness grew by 125% ([link](#))
- Between 2023 and 2024, Vermont has the largest percentage increase of individuals experiencing chronic patterns of homelessness who were unsheltered ([link](#))
- Over 95% of Vermont's homeless population was in some form of shelter as January, whether it was a traditional shelter, a hotel or a motel covered by an emergency housing voucher ([link](#))

POLICY TAKEAWAYS

- **Access to Shelter:** State and municipal policies highlight the need to expand emergency housing options to provide alternatives to public camping. Providing shelters and alternatives reduces the criminal justice involvement that makes it harder for people to get housed.
- **Housing first approaches:** Vermont is increasingly moving toward prioritizing permanent supportive housing, reflecting evidence-based solutions for reducing chronic homelessness
- **Municipal and State Collaboration:** While New Hampshire and Vermont differ in their approaches, both states are seeing increased collaboration between municipalities and state agencies to address homelessness. Municipalities are looking to state governments for policy frameworks that make it easier for them to address these issues.

CONCLUSION

The increasing criminalization of homelessness in New Hampshire and Vermont highlights the urgent need for policy interventions that focus on housing solutions rather than punitive measures. While New Hampshire has taken a more enforcement-based approach, Vermont is prioritizing long-term solutions such as housing-first initiatives and emergency shelter funding. Moving forward, both states must consider collaborative and evidence-based strategies that provide sustainable pathways out of homelessness while reducing reliance on criminalization as a response to housing insecurity.

CURRENT LEGISLATIVE EFFORTS

NEW HAMPSHIRE

- **Senate Bill 113 (SB 113):** Appropriates funding to the Department of Health and Human Services for homeless services and prevention
- **State Law on Public Camping:** New Hampshire law prohibits individuals from pitching tents or sleeping on public property without governmental permission. Violations are classified as unclassified misdemeanors, punishable by up to one year in jail and a fine of \$2,000.



People illustrations by Storyset

METHODOLOGY

In the fall of 2024, the Public Health Council of the Upper Valley hosted a legislative event to engage policymakers and subject matter experts in discussion of key health issues in the area. Following the event, participants were asked to prioritize policy issues for further exploration. Additional conversations with experts in housing and social services further informed the development of this summary.

We also connected with local statewide advocacy groups and public health organizations in the Upper Valley to gain insights into community needs and current gaps in services. By synthesizing this information and consulting with stakeholders, we developed an overview of legislative efforts that could significantly impact housing and support systems in New Hampshire and Vermont.

VERMONT

- **House Bill 246 (H. 246):** Focuses on supporting students experiencing homelessness and those exiting the foster care system to succeed in postsecondary education
- **Legislative Focus:** Vermont legislators have prioritized housing-first approaches and emergency shelter funding. Recent discussions have included efforts to allocate additional resources for low-barrier shelters and permanent supportive housing programs.
- **Municipal Ordinances:** While Vermont has no statewide ban on public camping, several municipalities have enacted ordinances restricting camping in public spaces.

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