



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA  
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES  
*Office of the Commissioner*

S. Duke Storen  
Commissioner

October 25, 2021

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Honorable Ralph Northam  
Governor of Virginia

Honorable Daniel Carey, M.D.  
Secretary of Health & Human Services

Honorable Brian J. Moran  
Secretary of Public Safety & Homeland Security

Honorable Janet D. Howell, Chair  
Senate Finance & Appropriations Committee

Honorable Luke E. Torian, Chair  
House Appropriations Committee

Daniel Timerlake, Director  
Department of Planning & Budget

**FROM:** S. Duke Storen *S. Duke Storen*

**SUBJECT:** Report on Emergency Shelter Readiness

I am pleased to submit the report on emergency shelter readiness and capabilities, pursuant to Item 358 (A) of the 2021 Appropriation Act. If you have questions or need additional information concerning this report, please contact me.

SDS:kc

**2020-2021 Report to the General Assembly**

**Commonwealth of Virginia Emergency Shelter  
Capabilities and Readiness**



**VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF  
SOCIAL SERVICES**

**October 2021**

## **Preface**

Item 358(A) of Chapter 1289 of the 2020 Appropriations Act establishes that “the Sheltering Coordinator shall provide a status report on the Commonwealth’s emergency shelter capabilities and readiness to the Governor, the Secretary of Health and Human Resources, the Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security, the Director of the Department of Planning and Budget, and the Chairmen of the House Appropriations and Senate Finance committees.”

This report, in accordance with Item 358(A), provides a status update on the Commonwealth’s emergency shelter capabilities and readiness. Due to response operations for the coronavirus pandemic, this annual report was waived for 2020. As a result, this report summarizes planning and preparedness activities for 2020-2021.

## Executive Summary

Virginia is susceptible to many types of hazards. Agencies at the state, regional, and local level work to identify and plan for all hazards that may result in emergency shelter operations, although much of that planning is siloed within various jurisdictional levels of government. Efforts are being made to identify and engage in opportunities to increase collaboration between these various entities.

While Hurricane Florence in 2018 provided an opportunity to put the State Coordinated Regional Shelter (SCRS) plans into action, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021 brought challenges that required new thinking and expanded planning. The health and safety of staff and evacuees is always the top priority in shelter operations, and much planning has been done to meet the challenges, resulting in flexible sheltering options to support both local shelter overflow and catastrophic statewide shelter needs while working with a limited pool of staffing resources. These plans require significant support from all stakeholders and contract resources.

This report identifies actions taken and challenges encountered and, where possible, how those challenges are being met. Of the many issues discussed, the most critical challenges include:

- Funding for shelter site assessments, to include ensuring building readiness for sheltering and appropriate access for all populations; updating existing and developing new Computer Aided Drafting (CAD) maps to address the layout of the shelter operation within each facility; and identifying new facilities to increase capacity.
- Full contract support for non-congregate shelter operations, to include all wrap-around services necessary to support evacuee needs during the event and to facilitate evacuees' quick return to their home base to start their recovery afterwards.
- Funding to support acquisition of appropriate basic resources for sheltering; expanding the existing supplies push pack in order to either support local/regional shelter needs or quickly stand up a state shelter while the remaining commodities are enroute.
- Completing development of the Electronic Tracking Network (ETN) shelter registration system to support data collection for local, regional and state partners.

Amidst these challenges, we have also made great strides forward. Noteworthy accomplishments discussed herein include the development of a non-congregate shelter plan; updating the congregate shelter site addendums; a complete update of the shelter commodity lists for each site; a temporary workaround addressing setbacks in implementing the shelter registration management system; and an exercise testing staffing capability.

A substantial amount of work has been completed, yet there is still much in progress, to meet these various challenges and identify emerging needs. While VDSS has been tasked with developing and maintaining the SCRS plan, state agency and Institutes of Higher Education (IHE) partners are to be commended for their flexibility and support of the expansion of both the plan and planning during these extraordinary times.

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## Introduction

The adverse conditions of the coronavirus pandemic presented both opportunities and challenges for shelter planning. The pandemic prompted changes to the Commonwealth of Virginia SCRS Plan (“state sheltering plan”) that expanded overall shelter capabilities, even as the congregate sheltering capacity and supporting workforce shrank due to social distancing restrictions and health and safety factors. While some critical shelter planning projects were delayed due to the response, the pandemic provided valuable lessons that are being applied to the state sheltering plan.

The state sheltering plan is intended to be activated when an event requires the evacuation of residents across jurisdictional boundaries and the need for sheltering exceeds the capability and/or capacity of the evacuating and neighboring jurisdictions. State shelters have been activated once, during Hurricane Florence in 2018. Historically, this plan has been based on congregate shelters in facilities such as gymnasiums, where many people are sheltered together in an open floor plan concept. On June 9, 2020, the State Health Commissioner issued an Order<sup>1</sup> directing the implementation of non-congregate sheltering of populations temporarily displaced due to evacuation orders. Where non-congregate sheltering is not possible, the order states that congregate shelters must adhere to social distancing recommendations, enhanced sanitizing practices on common surfaces, masking of staff and evacuees, and other appropriate guidance from state and federal public health authorities.

In response to this Order, the Commonwealth developed a new, yet untested, annex to the state sheltering plan addressing non-congregate sheltering (NCS). The original plan for congregate shelters has remained in place to serve as a backup to NCS, albeit at a reduced capacity to meet social distancing guidelines.

On August 2, 2021, the State Health Commissioner issued revised guidance<sup>2</sup> that recommends NCS whenever feasible, but allows for the expanded use of congregate sheltering while adhering to COVID health and safety protocols.

The pandemic and its related health and safety guidelines highlighted the competition for shelter resources between and within localities, regions, state agencies and nationally. This competition normally centers on staffing and commodities, but 2020 added the new element of NCS facilities. Many local jurisdictions have not been able to adequately develop NCS plans and resources on their own, and thus, with reduced staffing resources and capacity in their local congregate shelters, the burden of sheltering may fall more heavily on the state. This circumstance has highlighted some disconnects in the larger realm of shelter planning.

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<sup>1</sup> Order of the State Health Commissioner. (June 9, 2020). Order of Public Health Emergency.

<sup>2</sup> VDH Interim Guidance for Disaster Shelters During the COVID Pandemic. (August 2, 2021).

## Sheltering as a System

No matter the capacity, capability, location, or “owner” of the shelter, all shelters have the same function: to safely shelter displaced individuals until they can return to their community of origin or are transitioned to a longer-term housing solution. Thus, local, regional, and state planning partners need to work together in planning, response, and recovery operations. Although state shelters have been opened once, local shelters may open more frequently; thus, lessons learned are garnered through both real-world events and through state and local exercises.

As we look at the overall state of sheltering in the Commonwealth, it is important to note that sheltering is a complex and interdependent operation. All disasters are local, and all sheltering needs are initially addressed by the local jurisdictions where the impact occurs; however, the situation may grow exponentially in size, scale, need, and complexity in unexpected ways. Local shelter operations may need to scale up or down quickly to balance needs for evacuee capacity, staffing, and resources; state shelters are intended to supplement these local operations when overwhelmed. Because planning for various levels of shelters (local, host, regional, and state) throughout the state is somewhat disjointed and information sharing is sporadic, it is challenging to effectively manage this process.

Just as our transportation infrastructure is a system, so is sheltering. As a motorcycle, minivan, pickup truck, and bus are different means of transportation with differing capabilities and capacity, they all share the task of moving people using the same shared infrastructure to operate. So also are local, host, regional and state shelters; somewhat different in capability and capacity, but utilizing many of the same resources and sharing the same responsibility of keeping people safe during an emergency. Understanding sheltering as an interconnected system instead of a multitude of stand-alone capabilities may increase the Commonwealth’s collective ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters.

### **Current State**

In the Commonwealth there are currently four types of shelter planning<sup>3</sup>, which happen somewhat independently of each other:

Local shelter plans are developed, trained, equipped and executed within local jurisdictions. The goal is to take care of the people within the city or county itself, with little to no planning or coordination with surrounding jurisdictions. These shelters, typically located in schools and community centers, are usually “bare-boned” and offer few or no amenities, such as cots or hygiene supplies; the publicized expectation is for local community members to bring their own supplies and comfort items for at least the first few days. As noted in previous Local Capability Assessment of Readiness surveys (VDEM) and in the regional shelter readiness workshops conducted with localities in 2021, there is a very limited capacity in most jurisdictions to offer basic medical care, such as medication management and personal assistant services (PAS) for access and functional needs (AFN). Food is usually provided, although it may not meet special dietary needs, and many sites do not have a backup generator. While the jurisdictions open and initially staff these shelters, many local plans call for additional staffing support after the initial 72+ hours. A few jurisdictions, primarily in the western and northwestern parts of the state, have agreements with the Red Cross to directly provide or support initial shelter operations. Due to a number of factors, Red Cross has not typically been able to support local operations uniformly across the state, especially in

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<sup>3</sup> See *Commonwealth Sheltering Program. (2019). VDSS.*

geographic areas that tend to open shelters more frequently, such as coastal, central and northern Virginia. As such, many jurisdictions in these areas do not rely on Red Cross support for any immediate staffing or resource needs in their shelter plans.

Host shelter plans involve jurisdictions that agree to help each other by allowing the impacted jurisdiction(s) to evacuate and shelter in unimpacted “host” jurisdiction(s). The jurisdictions determine roles and responsibilities to support the shelter if activated; considerations include staffing, resourcing, reimbursement, transportation, and liability, among others. This planning partnership is an excellent way to keep evacuees reasonably close to home and allow jurisdictions to provide mutual aid-type services to support evacuation response. Host sheltering is used in many states to meet shelter demand and has great potential that needs to be further explored and developed within the Commonwealth.

Locally Coordinated Regional Shelters (LCRS), commonly called regional shelters, are rare in Virginia, and are another area of great potential for shelter planning. Currently, the City of Roanoke and Roanoke County, as well as counties in the Northern Virginia metro area, have regional shelter agreements. These shelters may be located in Institutes of Higher Education (IHEs), conference and convention centers, or other large-scale facilities. They may develop as part of an informal partnership between a few jurisdictions (such as Roanoke City, Roanoke County and City of Salem; or Fairfax City and Fairfax County) or may be more rigorously developed through a formal regional governance group (e.g., the Northern Capital Region has a mutual aid agreement that covers staffing and resourcing emergency shelters, supported by a small cache of shelter supplies housed at George Mason University purchased with Urban Area Security Initiative funds; a regional plan is also being discussed through the Hampton Roads Regional Planning District Commission Regional Shelter Subcommittee). Regional shelters afford local jurisdictions an opportunity to increase capacity and/or coordinate sharing of staffing and resources within their region while still keeping their citizens relatively close to their home communities. Citizens’ close proximity to their home base is important, as local communities contain the systems, employment, and other resources that displaced individuals rely on to support their recovery. Unfortunately, there are few plans for this critical part of the shelter system that currently exist.

State Coordinated Regional Shelters (SCRS), commonly called state shelters, are the final part of the system. State shelters are intended to meet sheltering needs when local capacity and/or capability is anticipated to be or has been exceeded. State shelter sites are located throughout the Commonwealth at IHEs and are intentionally not activated within impact areas to avoid competition for staffing and resources. Shelter planning and development at the state level is supported by information gleaned from the Hurricane Evacuation Study but is otherwise generally not connected to local or regional shelter planning efforts. While the state shelter plan is shared freely, localities often have little insight into the state’s planning, decision-making and operational processes. Due to the lack of host and regional shelters, state shelter sites have been placed on standby and activated only once in the past, during Hurricane Florence (2018), to handle expected capacity overflow directly from local shelter operations.

We tend to think of these various jurisdictional levels as being largely separate entities that siphon excess evacuees out of local shelter operations (see Figure 1). However, shelter planning could be more efficient and effective if conceived as a part of a process (see Figure 2), whereby all shelter planning is a cohesive effort with similar on-site capability. Planners would have knowledge of the various types of operations and their trigger points. These operations could then collaboratively manage evacuees at the lowest jurisdictional level to keep displaced persons as close to home as possible.



There will indeed be times when shelter operations are activated throughout the whole of the system and it will be stretched to capacity, but the overall burden will be better met and managed through collaborative planning and a more holistic operational understanding and process.

**Figure 2.**



This horizontal versus vertical thinking would be a marked change for all Commonwealth shelter planners. Lessons learned over the course of the past year highlight the need for a more systematic and integrated approach to shelter planning at all levels.

### ***Current Strategies for Resolution***

Building bridges between state, local, and regional shelter planning partners is key to the successful development of shared information and realignment of the shelter landscape from individual tiers to a cohesive system. Collaborative shelter planning between local, regional, and state entities is challenging. With 133 total county and city jurisdictions, it is complicated to have real dialogue and an in-depth understanding of local needs, resources, and plans. Thus, the issue of collaborative planning is being addressed in several ways.

State shelter planning dialogue has moved from a state-level only perspective to a more holistic perspective. Acknowledging that the state sheltering plan is heavily dependent on local response plans is a big step towards a more collaborative planning environment with local and regional entities. State shelter planning has relied almost exclusively on data regarding the estimated number of evacuees according to the Hurricane Evacuation Study, but the overall capability and capacity of local mass care operations is often inaccurate or misleading. For instance, while there may be information on shelter capacity (number of shelters and the number of evacuees they can accommodate), there is seldom information on the capability of how many shelters the jurisdiction can open at any one time using the locality's available resources, such as staffing. Capacity numbers don't tell the full story in shelter planning; local capabilities are even more important to understanding the bigger picture.

Accessing local information has proven to be difficult. To build trust and facilitate a more open dialogue, state shelter planning information has been pushed more regularly through the VDEM regional coordinators to local jurisdictions. While the state shelter plans themselves have always been shared, a more concerted effort has been made to engage local and regional planning partners to ensure a greater awareness and understanding of state shelter resources and gaps.

In the spring of 2021, VDSS and VDEM partnered to develop and deliver targeted regional shelter readiness workshops to help localities build out their shelter plans, strengthen local and regional partnerships, and learn best practices from each other. These workshops provided an opportunity for VDSS and VDEM to better understand challenges at the local level, and for all parties to collaborate in identifying solutions. There was broad consensus that this work was valuable, and the workshops will be continued on a regular basis.

## Progress on issues noted in the Report to the General Assembly, November 1, 2019<sup>4</sup>

The *Report to the General Assembly, 2019* identified five prominent shelter planning issues that were recommended for either clarification or priority work to be performed. The Executive Summary highlighted these issues as follows:

1. State plans do not clearly assign roles and responsibilities.
2. Responsibilities for procurement and contracting should be clarified.
3. Additional steps are needed regarding warehousing and maintaining existing stockpiles.
4. Enhanced training and assessment are needed to ensure adequate capacity and capability.
5. Improvements in completeness and timeliness of shelter data, including a web portal, would enhance responsiveness.

A number of steps have been taken or are currently underway to address each of these concerns. It is worth noting that shelter planning is continuous, fluid and somewhat reactive; as new guidance, best practices, and updated protocols emerge, they are introduced and adapted into the shelter plan. Since the *Report to the General Assembly, 2019* was made, planning has continued to evolve and the clarifications and corrective actions identified in that report were interwoven into ongoing plan updates. For example, pandemic guidance from the CDC and VDH recommended the use of non-congregate sheltering and limited capacity within congregate shelters. As a result, the state shelter plan was split into sections and a new protocol for non-congregate sheltering was developed. There is now a Base Plan<sup>5</sup>, which contains information relevant to all types of sheltering; Annex A Congregate Shelter<sup>6</sup>, which contains information relevant only to congregate sheltering; and Annex B Non-Congregate Shelter<sup>7</sup>, newly written with information specific to non-congregate sheltering, such as use of hotels, motels, etc. An additional addendum was added to the Congregate Annex specifically addressing pandemic protocol and processes that would need to be implemented during COVID or any subsequent epidemic/pandemic environment. Many of the items identified in the 2019 report for correction were addressed during that update process.

1. ***State plans do not clearly assign roles and responsibilities.*** *The SCR Shelter Plan states that VDEM and VDSS will jointly coordinate regarding activation of state shelters. Per that plan, this coordination would occur after the Hurricane Evacuation Working Group has recommended evacuation and sheltering actions. However, EO42<sup>8</sup> delegates authority to activate a state shelter solely to the State Coordinator. This inconsistency has led to disagreement about roles and responsibilities, and may have led to the unnecessary activation of state shelters. This process needs additional clarification of roles.*

Roles and responsibilities delineating the decision making and final authority process have been clarified. The SCRS Base plan now states in bullet 9.1.2 that “The VEST, through ESF 6, will make

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<sup>4</sup> Commonwealth of Virginia Report to the General Assembly. (November 1, 2019). Secretary of Finance.

<sup>5</sup> Commonwealth of Virginia State Coordinated Regional Shelter Base Plan. (2020).

<sup>6</sup> Commonwealth of Virginia State Coordinated Regional Shelter Annex A: Congregate Shelter. (2020).

<sup>7</sup> Commonwealth of Virginia State Coordinated Regional Shelter Annex B: Non-Congregate Shelter. (2020).

<sup>8</sup> Executive Order Number Forty-Two. (2019), Promulgation of the Commonwealth of Virginia Emergency Operations Plan and Delegation of Authority.

<https://www.governor.virginia.gov/media/governorviriniagov/executive-actions/EO-42-Promulgation-of-the-Commonwealth-of-Virginia-Emergency-Operations-Plan-and-Delegation-of-Authority.pdf>

recommendations for state actions to the State Coordinator through the VEST Lead” and 9.1.3 “The State Coordinator or designee, in coordination with the VDSS Commissioner or designee, will make the final decision on when to activate which, if any, SCR shelters.”

- 2. Responsibilities for procurement and contracting should be clarified.** *Currently, the COVEOP<sup>9</sup> assigns responsibility to acquire resources during an emergency to VDEM. In contrast, EO41<sup>10</sup> (2019) requires that state agencies have emergency procurement contracts. However, neither document nor other state plans fully address the capabilities of all agencies, which may mean that key public resources are not used in an emergency. The current framework could also lead to procurement inefficiencies or gaps, and further clarity of roles is needed.*

Procurement responsibilities have been delegated to individual agencies as required in EO41, with the recognition that VDEM may support requests that agencies may be unable to fulfill on their own, as identified in the COVEOP. The SCRS Base Plan now states in 6.8.2: “Each agency is responsible for keeping their commodity list updated within the SCRS plan to fulfill their shelter roles and responsibilities, and immediately forwarding any updates to VDSS for inclusion in the plan. VDSS will utilize agency commodity lists and initiate a commodity request to ESF7 to resource shelters that are activated” and in 6.8.3 that “Requests for additional resources will be submitted to and processed by the responsible agency for fulfillment.” Base plan 6.8.3.5 states “If an agency is unable to fulfill a request, the agency will submit a resource request to the VEST through the normal emergency request process.”

Annex A Section 7.3 further reiterates this, stating “DSS is responsible for initiating a commodity request with ESF7 via the commodity lists created during the planning phase. Any additional caches, contracts, MOU/MOAs, and/or pre-scripted mission requests related to supplies, commodities, and services created during the planning phase may be initiated and deployed by each agency if/as needed. Each agency is responsible for the deployment of their own staff and for initiating and deploying any contracts, MOU/MOAs, or pre-scripted mission requests to support their own staffing needs.

The Base plan elaborates on contract responsibilities, stating in 6.8.3.4 “All contracts must include a maximum fixed cost, a termination for convenience clause, and all amendments on modifications must be in writing” and in 6.8.3.4.2 that “All costs must be tied directly to the sheltering effort and be reasonable and necessary.”

It is recommended that whenever feasible, procurement and contracting be incorporated into future shelter exercises to ensure all partners are adept at handling these responsibilities.

- 3. Additional steps are needed regarding warehousing and maintaining existing stockpiles.** *Some state agencies own and store limited supplies and commodities for use in sheltering. VDSS, in coordination with IHEs, VDEM, and other state agencies, should create a list of supplies and then work with DGS to ensure sufficient contracts are in place and identify potential warehousing space.*

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<sup>9</sup> Commonwealth of Virginia Emergency Operations Plan. (2019).

<sup>10</sup> Executive Order Number Forty-One. (2019). Emergency Preparedness Responsibilities of State Agencies and Public Institutions of Higher Education.

<https://www.governor.virginia.gov/media/governorvirginiagov/executive-actions/EO-41-Emergency-Preparedness-Responsibilities-of-State-Agencies-and-Public-Institutions-of-Higher-Education.pdf>

The existing master commodity and supply site lists were updated in June 2021 with partner agencies based on current plans and resources. Existing stockpiles are quite limited, and work on accessing service and resource contracts is in process. VDEM is currently housing the existing pushpack of shelter supplies in their warehouse. No additional warehouse space at IHEs and partner agencies was identified as being currently or consistently available for SCRS use.

**4. Enhanced training and assessment are needed to ensure adequate capacity and capability.**

*Both capacity and capability are needed to support evacuees. Capacity measures the number of beds, while capability indicates how many people can be supported in a shelter given each shelter's staffing, service availability, and other resources. IHEs designated as state shelters have varying capabilities (ex: some have contracts with private vendors for food, others use their own staff, and sites at community colleges have limited food options). Despite these differences, the COVEOP and SCR plan generally address each IHE as if they are similar. Site specific annexes are used to address unique requirements and planning considerations of each site.*

All non-management VDSS shelter staffing roles were streamlined into a single role to allow for greater flexibility in staff assignment. This new role, Shelter Specialist, is trained to support all non-management shelter functions (registration, dormitory management, supply distribution, and discharge). Additionally, the non-congregate shelter plan required a new role, Call Taker, to support a call center with virtual shelter registration, non-congregate shelter assignment, and provision of individual support services (such as access and functional needs, transportation needs, health and medical needs, pet shelter needs and/or behavioral health needs) for non-congregate residents through the use of partner agency subject matter experts (SMEs). VDSS has developed and delivered training for the Shelter Specialist and Call Taker roles, and enhanced training activities for Shelter Managers. SMEs have been invited to participate in VDSS agency training to better understand VDSS roles, functions, and processes as they relate to their individual agency roles.

All identified congregate SCRS sites were visited and assessed in 2021, and discussions were held with each site regarding their potential for warehousing shelter supplies and utilizing their existing contracts for supporting shelter needs. While capabilities vary somewhat from site to site, the IHEs have broad limitations in providing significant support for shelter operations. Maintaining concurrent campus operations to support students is the top priority for IHEs and limits bandwidth to support the sheltering effort. While other types of sites have been considered, such as arenas, convention centers, and fairgrounds, these sites may support local shelter plans and/or may have other challenges that make them less than willing shelter partners, such as potential loss of revenue from cancelled events. As private entities, the state lacks control of these facilities, making it more difficult to open and manage shelter operations.

The site-specific addendums have been updated. These addendums include the site-specific background, operations, maps of identified shelter building(s), and the site policies, roles and responsibilities.

**5. Improvements in completeness and timeliness of shelter data, including a web portal, would enhance responsiveness.** *Local and state shelter boards act as repositories of sheltering data, but the usefulness and reliability of local data are affected by the ability of local staff to keep these data up to date. Shelter data could be improved through use of a single statewide shelter management and registration system, which would allow localities to directly register shelter*

*residents into a system, and enable VDEM's WebEOC system to automatically display real-time shelter data. Real-time data could then be displayed on a public-facing website.*

Data sharing and management has long been recognized as a key aspect of shelter coordination between various levels of government. The previous shelter management system, EWA Phoenix, was unable to meet updated security requirements instituted by VITA, and their contract was released in July 2019. A search immediately began for a replacement system, and a comparable system that met security requirements was identified. VDSS and VDEM installed the Emergency Tracking Network (ETN) in WebEOC in late 2019 and began initial testing in early 2020. The project was put on hold due to the pandemic, but was re-initiated in late 2020, and put on hold again due to the multi-agency statewide vaccination response in 2021.

With ongoing delays and concern about not having a system in place for the 2021 hurricane season, VDSS developed an internal "bandaid" solution for state shelters utilizing Sharepoint and an affiliated app to perform basic registration functions electronically. This system is not connected to WebEOC and has no visibility outside of VDSS, but a reporting function will provide necessary information for leadership.

Development and testing work is anticipated to resume on the ETN system in Fall 2021. It's important to note that the previous system, EWA Phoenix, was not uniformly used by all jurisdictions throughout the Commonwealth. Work will need to be done to recruit, equip and train all jurisdictions in the new system, and it will need to be exercised to ensure its successful deployment during emergency events.

In the interim, VDEM updated the shelter board within WebEOC and input Local Capability Assessment of Readiness (LCAR) survey shelter data to prepopulate the sites in the system so that localities can quickly input only operational data during an event; however, recent events requiring sheltering have demonstrated that localities remain reluctant to or incapable of sharing data on a state platform. During the February 2021 winter weather event, the WebEOC shelter board was not used, and a separate spreadsheet was developed and updated to track local shelter information attained through VDEM regional staff.

Although there is interest in development of a single statewide platform to deliver shelter status and information at all jurisdictional levels; the reluctance of localities to share data even within WebEOC, which is not a public-facing platform, does not indicate local readiness for this level of inclusion. It should be anticipated that buy-in for information sharing on a public facing website will be difficult, at best, at this time.

### **The Current Status of the Commonwealth's Emergency Shelter Capabilities and Readiness**

Much work and many changes have taken place since the 2019 report was submitted. The year 2020 began in a routine manner and was quickly disrupted by multiple emergency events, foremost the COVID pandemic, but also ongoing civil unrest and multiple weather events that put the Commonwealth on alert. Uncertainty regarding timing of the completed rollout of the COVID vaccine starting in December 2020 added another wrinkle to the continued uncertainty. These events spilled over into 2021 and lent an additional urgency to planning efforts. ESF 6 partner agencies met this urgency and continued to make progress through a number of collaborative efforts.

## **COVID Impacts and Adaptations**

Guidance from the CDC and VDH recommended NCS when resources (hotel/motel rooms and similar) were available, and socially-distanced congregate sheltering only if NCS was insufficient. This severely reduced the overall capacity of the state congregate shelter sites and required new planning to prepare for and support NCS operations.

Congregate sites support almost all service needs on-site, including evacuee registration, feeding, sleeping, first aid, basic medical care, transition planning, and discharge. Access and functional needs (AFN) accommodations and basic supply needs, such as infant and adult diapers, baby formula, hearing aid batteries, and other personal supply items are all provided at the shelter. When developing the plans for the NCS, all of these same needs had to be met at various NCS sites. These supports would have to be contracted at the time of the emergency site by site, and some individual by individual; therefore, these could not be resourced ahead of time.

## **SITES**

A key concern for the state shelter plan is locating and maintaining adequate shelter sites. While IHE sites were identified years ago, buildings and campus features have changed over time, which has affected shelter capability and capacity. Regular reassessment of all shelter sites and identification of new congregate shelter facilities is an important part of maintaining the state shelter plan.

With the Public Health Order<sup>11</sup> issued early in the pandemic, non-congregate shelter resources needed to be identified, and a mechanism for locating and reserving rooms needed to be developed.

## **Shelter Site Assessments**

Shelter site assessments at the IHEs identified in the state shelter plan are critical to updating each site addendum with important information, including site-specific policies, maps, layouts, capacity, commodities, and staffing.

DSS requested funding (\$325,720 in FY21) to contract for the review and update of the state shelter sites using the Rapid Shelter Screening Criteria and for compliance with the American Disabilities Act as amended (ADA). This process, which supports the agency's legal counsel recommendation that state shelter sites be reassessed every 3 to 5 years, will verify the continued use and availability of pre-identified shelter sites, ensure building readiness as general public shelters during declared emergencies, develop/update CAD maps for each site, and provide for identification of additional sites to increase state shelter capacity across the Commonwealth. This proposal supports EO 41 (2019) that directs each State Agency to include emergency preparedness planning, training, and exercises as basic responsibilities and to include emergency preparedness in its strategic planning and performance management process. It also supports EO 42 (2019) that authorizes the activation of the state shelter plan, as needed and implemented by the VDSS. Unfortunately, this funding was unallotted and then eliminated; thus, this critical work remains outstanding.

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<sup>11</sup> Order of the State Health Commissioner. (June 9, 2020). Order of Public Health Emergency.

## ***Current State***

Without contracted expertise in engineering and assessment, VDSS staff began a more informal site assessment process in October 2019 that continued into 2021. Site assessments were conducted by a coalition of state shelter partner agencies that included VDSS, VDEM, VDH, DBHDS, VDACS, VSP, VITA, site representatives from each IHE, and occasionally some local jurisdictional officials, such as local DSS or VDH staff. Assessments for seven of the thirteen current shelter sites were completed or in progress before the onset of the pandemic, at which point the site visits ceased as campuses closed, non-essential state travel was cancelled, and other agency work took immediate priority.

These assessments resumed in 2021. Along with completing the final six site visits, the seven previously visited sites were re-visited by current and new VDSS staff to reassess each area in light of potential modifications in future planning efforts<sup>12</sup>, specifically the ability to support contract service needs, warehouse commodities, and house shelter staff onsite.

## ***Challenges***

As demonstrated by the site assessments, the IHEs have vastly different capabilities and capacity. At full capacity (without COVID social distancing restrictions), the largest IHE shelter site can house 1,668 residents (1,577 general population, 91 medical), while the smallest can hold 117 residents (111 general population, 6 medical). If shelters are opened with capacity restrictions due to the pandemic, these sites can only hold roughly half of their normal capacity.

Furthermore, IHEs regularly engage in capital improvement projects. These projects can take specific buildings used for shelter activities offline for several years, and buildings are sometimes modified such that they are no longer functional as shelters; occasionally, buildings are demolished altogether. Contracted expertise in engineering and assessment would support the thorough assessment / reassessment needs and updated CAD mapping required to keep up with these capital improvements, as well as help to identify replacement facilities when current buildings are no longer appropriate for sheltering.

In addition, not all identified buildings are fit for use year-round. Two of the current buildings on the state shelter site list do not have air conditioning and are unable to be retrofitted. This will inhibit use of those facilities during the warmest months of the year.

The capability to house medical residents is also quite limited. Medical residents are typically housed in a connected yet separate area of the shelter facility, such as an ancillary gymnasium or large conference room, where they have access to nursing staff and more electrical outlets to support minor medical care needs. All sites currently offer a space for medical residents, but it is a tiny fraction of their overall shelter space. Depending on the needs of the emergency and the evacuee population, these areas could fill quickly. The ability to quickly expand beyond the designated medical area in a surge situation is not feasible due to physical space limitations (lack of additional space with sufficient electrical capability) and limited staffing.

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<sup>12</sup> See the *2021 Model Plan Report*

Considerations for pets during an evacuation is required<sup>13</sup> in shelter planning, and although the overall pet sheltering capability is relatively high (1,690 pets total), it is not an accommodation offered at every site. Seven of the thirteen sites can house pets. The remaining sites have not identified space on or near their campus that will accommodate pets. This will complicate evacuation messaging and may hamper evacuees from quickly registering into the nearest available state shelter if they bring a pet to a site without pet capability.

Warehousing a complete set of shelter supplies on site at the IHEs is neither realistic nor practical; warehousing portions of limited and expensive commodities at each site may increase overall logistical operations between non-activated sites to support activated sites. Securing, managing and inventorying commodities stored at multiple sites will be a significant challenge, one that has neither been defined nor assigned within the current state shelter plan. Finally, warehouse space on many campuses is limited or non-existent, as the IHEs use this space to support daily operations.

VDSS continues to work with agency and IHE partners to identify solutions to these challenges to refine shelter planning and improve operational capability overall. Because campus capital improvements and physical alterations tend to happen with some regularity, site visits will continue at minimum on a biennial basis. VDSS remains in regular contact with IHE partners to get updates on facility changes, including potential new capabilities and capacity.

### **Development of Non-Congregate Shelter Plan and Capability**

In 2008, VDSS, in collaboration with partner agencies, developed, and continues to maintain, the State Managed Shelter (SMS) Plan, later renamed the SCRS Plan. The plan has undergone various updates over the course of time, but the pandemic entailed a major overhaul of the SCRS Plan. Per CDC<sup>14</sup> and VDH<sup>15</sup> COVID-19 guidance, and as described in the COVEOP Hazard-Specific Annex #3<sup>16</sup>, use of non-congregate sheltering (NCS) is encouraged where possible. When not possible, congregate sheltering is permissible with limited capacity, though not ideal. NCS typically includes hotels, motels, dormitories and other similar types of living arrangements that provide an individual or family private living space.

FEMA has issued similar guidance allowing for NCS options<sup>17</sup>. As state and public health orders have been lifted in many areas, FEMA has begun to transition guidance back to congregate care, narrowing the parameters for NCS reimbursement to specific situations, such as when COVID-19 case rates are high, community vaccination rates are low, and/or the community is otherwise high-risk. At the time of this report, FEMA reimbursement for NCS will expire November 30, 2021.

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<sup>13</sup> See the *Pet Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act*. (2006). <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/PLAW-109publ308>

<sup>14</sup> See *CDC Interim Guidance for General Population Disaster Shelters During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. (2020). <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/Guidance-for-Gen-Pop-Disaster-Shelters-COVID19.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> See *VDH Interim Guidance for Disaster Shelters During the COVID Pandemic*. (2020).

<sup>16</sup> See *COVEOP Hazard Specific Annex #3 Hurricane & Tropical Storm Response COVID-19 Planning Guidance & Considerations*. (2020).

<sup>17</sup> See *FEMA Emergency Non-Congregate Sheltering during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (Interim)*. FEMA Policy 104-009-18. (2020).



## **Current State**

The 2019 state shelter plan did not include any provisions for NCS. To address NCS needs, the plan was updated in the spring of 2020, and now consists of the Base Plan, containing information relevant to both congregate and NCS operations, followed by two annexes. Annex A Congregate Sheltering contains all congregate care information that was updated and approved in 2019, as well as an Addendum addressing pandemic specific congregate sheltering. Annex B Non-Congregate Sheltering contains all new NCS planning developed in the early months of the pandemic. The Base Plan and both annexes were approved and released in July 2020.

A great deal of work went into quickly developing capabilities to support the NCS plan. VDEM and DGS identified a federal contractor to quickly procure blocks of hotel rooms. VDSS contracted with a software solutions company to develop a telephonic shelter registration and hotel assignment system that would be implemented through 2-1-1. A cadre of VDSS staff were trained to become call takers in this new virtual registration system, and SMEs from other agencies (VDH, VDACS, VDEM, VDDHH and DBHDS) were also trained to provide telephonic assistance and support to evacuees with specific needs.

As a component of this work, an inter-agency task force met daily starting in July 2020 to identify and resolve important details needed to fully operationalize the NCS plan, specifically: establishing contracting; addressing equity challenges in NCS sheltering; identifying reasonable costs; identifying damage liability and potential insurance coverage; and addressing equity challenges for transportation to NCS shelters. DGS obtained a quote on liability insurance, and approval was given to purchase a policy.

Concurrently, congregate care capabilities were also maintained as a back up to NCS. Due to the recent DOLI regulations<sup>18</sup> promulgated to enhance workplace safety during the pandemic, congregate care staff roles and responsibilities were streamlined to allow for greater flexibility in assignment. A personal protection equipment (PPE) push pack was developed for sheltering, and protocols for congregate care in a COVID-19 environment were developed. A separate staffing pool from VDSS was identified for congregate care and trained on these updated roles and protocols.

## **Challenges**

Utilizing hotels, dormitories, and similar facilities for NCS presents many challenges. Chief among them are availability and suitability.

Availability speaks to the current occupancy; we cannot displace current (or reserved) hotel or dormitory residents for NCS operations. Many evacuees with the means to do so may choose to evacuate to a hotel/motel in a safe area close to their home instead of a public shelter, limiting the supply of available rooms for state shelter use. Many hotels and motels maintain contracts with response agencies and industries which also depletes room availability for evacuees. Additionally, hotels and motels may not wish to shelter evacuees for other internal reasons. Some areas in the state, particularly in the Piedmont and far Southwest, have a limited number of hotel/motel stock to work with, further limiting capacity.

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<sup>18</sup> See *Department of Labor and Industry 16VAC25-220 Emergency Temporary Standard Infectious Disease Prevention: SARS-CoV-2 Virus That Causes COVID-19. (7/27/2020).*

Suitability speaks to both the location and condition of the site, as well as ability to meet the potential needs of the evacuees. NCS sites located in evacuation, flood, or storm surge areas or sites that do not meet regulatory requirements for health and safety may not be used. There must also be rooms that provide adequate accommodations according to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to meet the needs of individuals with certain access or functional needs.

Additionally, local jurisdictions are seeking these same limited resources to facilitate their NCS plans. VDEM sent out a statewide survey in August 2020 to the hotel industry association and identified several hundred hotel/motels that were willing to support NCS operations. This information, including individual site contact information, number of ADA rooms, and pet sheltering capability, was made available in ArcGIS for localities to use to support their NCS planning. It is unknown at this time to what extent that has been helpful to local planning efforts.

Reports from other partners (states and the Red Cross) that utilized the federal contractor that the Commonwealth procured to book hotel rooms for NCS in 2020 indicated that the contractor was not always able to quickly accommodate task orders and lacked adequate customer service to meet quickly changing disaster response and recovery needs. While Virginia was fortunate to avoid putting this contractor to the test, concerns remain regarding the viability of this contract service. As a result, work is ongoing to find alternative NCS booking service solutions to ensure that state NCS operations are robust, nimble, and can handle large capacity if needed.

Following the NCS decision brief, the inter-agency task force began working on a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a turn-key solution as an alternative to the contractor and registration system noted above. The RFP desires to bundle room procurement, assignment, and wraparound services that support meal service, AFN accommodation, transportation, and other ancillary needs. The RFP also seeks to expand the list of potential NCS sites beyond hotels/motels and dormitories to other types of properties, including but not limited to short-term vacation rentals, seasonal commercial recreational camps, state-owned and corporate lodging facilities, and others. At the time of this writing, the RFP is still in development.

The NCS registration platform identified as a solution in 2020 was functional but not adequate to meet the anticipated needs of telephonic registration. It was cumbersome to use, following a non-intuitive order of operation utilizing multiple screens, which may lead to operator error and incomplete registration. In both testing and training use, software glitches were uncovered that were not always easily or readily addressed. Furthermore, canned reporting capabilities were limited, and additional software glitches prevented full testing of ad hoc reporting capabilities. The temporary solution developed by VDSS IT in Sharepoint provides a similar capability with an easier interface for the VDSS call takers to use in assigning NCS space. This temporary solution will be the system in use for NCS telephonic registration operations as well as for congregate site registration in 2021.

NCS may be used to not only support evacuees in a public health emergency but could also support a single jurisdiction that needs additional shelter support or a large special needs community, such as a senior residence, that the local jurisdiction is unable to safely accommodate in local shelters. In these small scale instances it may be more cost effective to provide NCS than to open a congregate shelter. States, such as Louisiana, who utilized NCS for large-scale events during the 2020 hurricane season, have shared many of the unforeseen challenges associated with large-scale NCS operations. Having expended a great deal of time and effort developing the NCS plan, it is both practical and reasonable to revise and

maintain this plan beyond the immediate needs of the pandemic; however, the plan will need contract support to make it truly viable moving forward.

## **STAFFING**

Shelter planning is a labor-intensive process that requires collaboration with numerous stakeholders and partners at all levels. Having trained staff to respond and implement the plan is critical to the success of the operation. Congregate and non-congregate shelters require staffing, although roles vary somewhat between the operations.

### **Staffing Needs for Congregate Shelters**

All agencies providing staffing support are responsible for identifying their own staff and volunteers or contracting staff support to fulfill their roles within the state shelter. These roles include shelter management, general population support (VDSS), support for the medical area (VDH, Medical Reserve Corps), pet shelter (VDACS), security (VSP, DMA), behavioral health (DBHDS), access and functional needs support (VDEM), IT (VITA), security (VSP), and facility management, Public Information Officer, and fire watch staff (IHEs).

Prior to COVID, all non-essential VDSS staff in Pay Band 5 and above were assigned a role in supporting state shelter operations, per VDSS policy. While this seemingly ensured a ready supply of staff, daily roles and the needs of the individual staff, work units, and events often precluded many staff from participating as intended. Nonetheless, prior to the pandemic, staffing was considered to be generally adequate to meet initial needs for opening up to three state shelters, with other staffing resources (Adjunct Emergency Workforce) integrating to support additional shelter activations and/or activation beyond the first two weeks.

### ***Current State***

The DOLI regulations regarding employee health and safety impacted shelter staffing. In accordance with DOLI 16VACS25-220-40<sup>19</sup>, an exposure assessment was conducted for all VDSS shelter roles, and exposure for shelter work was determined to be medium risk for all roles with appropriate PPE. However, the multitude of individual health risk factors associated with the virus placed many VDSS staff in one or more high risk categories; additionally, childcare and family safety concerns further depleted available staffing. While VDSS can easily mitigate health risks through telework for daily operations, that is not possible with congregate shelter operations.

In an effort to identify staff willing and able to serve, VDSS sent out a survey to its agency staff requesting support for congregate shelter (on-site, public-facing) operations. Additionally, the Adjunct Emergency Workforce (AEW) was reinitiated and promoted to state employees in early March 2021 to recruit additional staff for shelter support, among other emergency roles. The VDSS Office of Emergency Management (OEM) hired an Emergency Workforce Coordinator in May 2021 to recruit individuals for and sustain engagement with its emergency workforce needs. Although great progress has been made

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<sup>19</sup> Department of Labor and Industry. (1/13/2021). *16VAC25-220, Final Permanent Standard for the Infectious Disease Prevention of the SARS-CoV-2 Virus That Causes COVID-19.*

in growing the VDSS Emergency Workforce, at the time of this writing, staffing to fully support VDSS roles and responsibilities in state shelters is insufficient to open more than 2-3 sites.

In August 2021, VDSS conducted a Virtual Activation and Rostering Exercise (VAREX). The exercise afforded an opportunity to get a real-time 'snapshot' of staffing capability. As a part of the exercise, six shelter facilities were activated across three sites. Due to COVID social distancing restrictions, these six facilities would currently only be able to accommodate approximately 1,780 evacuees, which would not meet the demand of an evacuation for a major storm (category 3 and higher). Staffing six facilities was very challenging for all agencies, and there were shortfalls noted from all partners, including VDSS. This has provided a realistic picture of the availability of staff to support shelter operations; shelter sites will not be successful unless all supporting agencies are able to fully meet their staffing requirements.

### ***Challenges***

The overall limited staffing availability for congregate shelters between VDSS and AEW staff is of great concern. Furthermore, shelter staffing is likely to remain limited until community fears about the safety concerns of the pandemic have receded and staff are recalled to their pre-pandemic work sites for daily operations. Other staffing resources, such as volunteer organizations, are not reliable at this point to support congregate shelters. Similar impacts are expected within shelter partner agencies (VDH, VDACs, DBHDS, VSP) and in localities, as well.

It is worth noting that there were no penalties for staff declining to serve, nor were there any bonuses for volunteering. Of the staff that completed the required training, most were very enthusiastic about supporting the shelter mission, despite the questions and concerns they shared regarding personal safety. Many other staff that responded affirmatively to the DSS survey either did not start or complete the shelter training; some feedback has indicated that daily work priorities precluded some staff from completing this requirement. Some staff may have had second thoughts or considered other health risks or family / childcare issues after responding to the survey.

VDSS shelter training is offered in several modalities, including virtual classes, web-based self-study, and just-in-time training to facilitate easy access while meeting the various learning needs of the workforce. Nonetheless, dedicating time to complete training has been challenging for many in the shelter response workforce.

### **Staffing Needs for Non-Congregate Shelter Operations**

While NCS operations require less staffing overall, staff are still required to handle evacuee registration and discharge support and communication. The intent of NCS is to have evacuees connect to a virtual instead of a physical location for these services, so staff needed to be identified and trained to support a virtual registration and communication process.

### ***Current State***

Because there is the possibility that NCS and congregate shelter operations may need to operate concurrently due to capacity limitations, VDSS identified via survey a separate pool of staff to support NCS operations for telephonic registration. This role is ideal for employees at higher risk during the pandemic, as employees may work from home using normal work equipment to connect to the registration software and handle incoming calls from evacuees. This role had a robust volunteer

response, and an adequate number of staff were trained. Partner agencies providing subject matter expertise (SME) for the call center identified staff to fill their respective roles.

### ***Challenges***

The positive response to the new call taker role was not completely unexpected as a 'virtual' assignment is associated with less risk. However, the continued challenge will be keeping this pool of staff engaged and offering regular opportunities to practice their skills on the NCS registration platform. A series of practice sessions was set up in the Fall of 2020 for this purpose. While these sessions had good engagement overall, this pool of staff needs updated training on the temporary system that VDSS developed for the 2021 hurricane season and will need training again once a permanent registration solution is identified and finalized.

Partner agencies providing SME support will also need to keep their staff engaged and current with these changes in the registration system. The original pool of SMEs was small; partners should identify a large enough pool of SME staff to support robust NCS call center needs.

## **COMMODITIES**

Commodities include the supplies, services, and equipment needed to support shelter operations from activation through demobilization. Along with staffing, managing and supporting the commodities list is one of the largest and most complex tasks in shelter planning. Resources and funding seldom align neatly with service needs and expectations.

### **Commodities**

As noted from Hurricane Florence in 2018, procuring commodities without a pre-existing contract during an emergency is extremely challenging and expensive. Ongoing planning efforts have focused on ways to manage commodities in a more efficient and cost-effective manner that allows for quick mobilization of state shelters as needed.

### ***Current State***

A master commodity list, containing all of the supplies, services, and equipment necessary for each partner agency's operation was developed in 2014 when preparing a Request for Proposals. From that master list, an individualized list was developed for each identified state shelter site specific to its capacity, capability and needs. For example, while one site may need a contract meal service due to lack of kitchen facilities, another site may need additional shower facilities to augment the limited locker room showers onsite. Other supplies are contingent on the shelter capacity, such as the number of cots. Due to renovations at SCRS sites, the commodity requirements must be frequently reviewed and updated to appropriately adjust to changing capacity and service needs.

Warehouse capacity at each shelter site has been explored, but no space has been identified as being sufficient or consistently available for storage of shelter supplies. VDEM maintains a small quantity of shelter supplies that are currently warehoused in Richmond. These supplies include an initial shelter

opening push pack (1000 qty) of cots, blankets, pillows, towels, hygiene products, and diapers; a small quantity of durable medical supplies to support AFN needs (wheelchairs, walkers, etc.); and several pushpacks of personal protective equipment for staff (face coverings, gloves, etc.). These supplies may be used to support either local or state needs.

Many shelter commodities are perishable or will not age well in storage and should be contracted as needed; thus, commodity and service contracts at each site were also explored. IHEs use a mix of state and local contracts to meet their needs, and service capabilities differ greatly between vendors across sites. For instance, one site could supply the kitchen but not the food, but only during summer break; another site's kitchen was not accessible to contract food preparation staff; and other site contracts couldn't accommodate additional meal capacity at any time during the year. These types of individual disparities between the sites would be extremely difficult to manage through different site contracts, especially if there were multiple state shelter operations running concurrently, as was the case in 2018, and as one might expect in a catastrophic event.

### ***Challenges***

Ideally, the goal is to have enough durable supplies to initiate opening several shelters at once or support multiple local or regional shelters for long-term sheltering needs. The limited amount of supplies currently on hand may impede a quick response to a large-scale event that requires either extensive state shelter operations or the support of multiple jurisdictions with state resources. Warehousing space for durable supplies is also a concern, as there is cost and management to storage, as well as logistics for inventory, deployment, and restocking. Identifying funds to support acquisition of appropriate basic resources for sheltering is an unmet need in shelter preparedness.

Recognizing that a complete turn-key contract for all commodities and services may be prohibitively expensive, the inter-agency task force is currently working to identify a state contract that can handle many of the commodity and service needs across sites in a cost-effective manner, and then default to individual contracts where needed to complete any outstanding needs for the operation.

### **SHELTER REGISTRATION**

An electronic shelter management system helps quickly register evacuees into a shelter and provides real-time capacity and situational awareness regarding not only the evacuees and their individual needs, but also their service animals and pets; it can also manage commodities and transportation assets. Evacuees are asked simple questions at the point of registration (name, phone number, food allergy, additional needs, etc) and issued a wristband with a barcode that is scanned and tied to their record and to the family group within the system. A single platform used by state, local and regional shelters would provide situational awareness of the entire shelter system.

The previous system, EWA Phoenix, was contracted by VDSS and made available at no cost to all Commonwealth localities. The software was not widely utilized by local jurisdictions for a number of reasons: the software was prone to glitches, the vendor was slow to perform maintenance and updates, and with local and state staff turnover it was difficult to keep the appropriate shelter staff trained in its use. Some rural localities preferred not to rely on a system that needed electrical power, especially if they didn't have a generator for their shelter. Additionally, many localities preferred to use Red Cross paper forms, which allowed for an easier transition of shelter operations to Red Cross control if long

term sheltering was needed. Ultimately, EWA Phoenix was discontinued in 2019 due to the VITA's enhanced information security requirements, which the vendor was unable to meet.

VDSS identified the Electronic Tracking Network (ETN) as a potential replacement for EWA Phoenix in 2019. ETN was developed by the Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM) and housed on their WebEOC platform, making it an ideal product to integrate into the Commonwealth's WebEOC platform. Representatives from VDEM and VDSS met to partner on the project and work out details on infrastructure, development costs, and ongoing maintenance. The project was broken into three phases:

- Phase One - basic implementation, testing and training, to be completed by August 2020;
- Phase Two - improvement of functionality, access, and expanded training, to be completed by June 1, 2021; and
- Phase Three - maintenance and continued training, to be ongoing upon the completion of phase two.

An MOU was drafted to formalize this inter-agency partnership and delineate roles, responsibilities, and financials including an estimate of new simultaneous users that the system could produce in WebEOC. TDEM provided the code, and the system was installed and tested in early 2020 (Phase One). It generally performed as promised, barring a few minor system issues to be addressed in Phase Two. Other issues identified at that time concerned information security protocols and access, reporting capabilities, and the limited number of IT staff to support the implementation and maintenance needs in WebEOC.

All work was then delayed by the onset of the pandemic, and resumed in December 2020. The turnover of some key staff brought about an opportunity to expand the project members to include new staff, additional representatives from other state agencies, and regional and local partners. Representatives were solicited from VDH, VDACS, DBHDS, regional VDEM staff (R7, R5), local emergency management (Norfolk, Loudon) and local DSS staff (Charlottesville, Chesapeake). Work was halted again in January 2021, as VDEM was engaged in supporting the vaccine distribution; it is not anticipated that work on the project will resume until Fall 2021.

### ***Current State***

To meet the immediate need, VDSS IT developed a very basic electronic registration tool to support state shelter registration if needed for the 2021 hurricane season, but it does not have the full range of capability that ETN has, nor does it provide any capability to share information directly into WebEOC.

### ***Challenges***

After the delay in implementation caused by the pandemic and the changes in key IT staff, the project essentially needed to be restarted in December 2020. The additional delay due to the priority of vaccine distribution will most likely cause another restart once VDEM is available to refocus on the project.

Although ETN has many capabilities, the system lacks the ability to create and publish reports. TDEM utilized a separate platform for reporting, therefore Virginia will need to develop and build out reporting capabilities for the system. The timeline for this development and buildout has not been established.

Ideally, all shelters in the state could and should use the same shelter management platform to facilitate situational awareness and evacuee movement, if needed, throughout the system. The Hampton Roads

Planning District Commission All Hazards Advisory Committee (HRPDC AHAC) Shelter Subcommittee acquired a grant to identify and purchase a shelter management system for use within VDEM Region 5. VDSS learned of this development and reached out to the Subcommittee to share information on the development of ETN in hopes of bringing the region onboard with the product; however, with the aforementioned delays, HRPDC AHAC may decide to move ahead with purchasing a registration system for the region. If this region moves forward outside of the state system it will likely hinder the ability of the state as a whole (local/regional/state) to collaborate within a single system. Promoting ETN use throughout the state for all shelter operations will be a priority once the system is fully tested and ready to deploy, and a promotional campaign will need to be developed. VDSS has also initiated discussion into developing ETN training for local frontline users, including both emergency management and social services partners; these agencies are typically the biggest users in local jurisdictions.

## **TRAINING**

Preparing staff to support shelter operations is critical to success. This entails staff understanding how they must personally prepare; how they will receive notification of activation; the expectations and mechanics of deployment; roles and responsibilities while on assignment; and responsibilities in demobilization and post-activation.

### **Shelter Training**

Since the inception of state shelters, VDSS OEM has developed and produced its own training and exercise program to support fulfillment of VDSS state shelter and other mass care operation roles and responsibilities. While many VDSS staff have taken basic shelter training in the past, we do not currently have a “refresher” course or role-specific training. We identified this as a need and began work to address the challenge.

VDSS developed an orientation to the state shelter plan, available in the Commonwealth of Virginia Learning Center (COVLC), which is available to all partner state agency staff to provide a basic understanding of the state shelter plan. Partner agencies also use a mix of their own training modalities and are expected to train their staff and volunteers to their particular roles within the shelter. For instance, VDH uses the TRAIN platform to provide online shelter courses tailored to their shelter role in supporting health and medical needs. VDH also provides additional interactive virtual classroom training for its Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) volunteers on an annual or as-needed basis. Other agencies rely on a combination of internal training, which may include local / state shelter and mass care exercises, to support their staff preparedness.

### ***Current State***

In 2020, VDSS OEM hired a professional in curriculum design and delivery to better support the training program. This was prescient, as the many adjustments in the state shelter plan – developing NCS plans, developing the telephonic registration system, updating the roles and protocols in congregate sheltering required a great deal of new training to prepare staff. Once these updated plans were approved in July 2020, training was then developed and appropriate VDSS staff were recruited and trained. Nine new general and role-specific courses have been created and delivered via a virtual classroom experience,



with opportunities for staff to engage with the material and have their questions and concerns answered.

Just-in-Time (JIT) and refresher training tools have also been developed to support new agency staff that may get quickly pulled into shelter operations before they have had the opportunity to complete all of their required training, as well as current staff that would like to refresh on shelter protocols immediately prior to being deployed.

### ***Challenges***

As identified elsewhere in this report, state shelter plans will continue to be refined to address changes, lessons learned, and best practices. Training is developed based on current plans and procedures, current contract and software solutions, and current health and safety protocols. These practices, solutions, and protocols are likely to change over time as the ongoing search for better tools and solutions continues.

Each agency involved in sheltering is responsible for training their own staff, and this training should be tracked internally by the individual agencies; however, it is not known to what degree and how often other agencies train and refresh their shelter staff. Ideally, all staff that are participating in shelter operations should have taken, at a minimum, VDSS-OEM1101 Introduction to the State Coordinated Regional Shelter Plan (available in the COVLC), along with any internal agency training that is pertinent to their shelter role. Training is discussed at shelter planning meetings and is understood on a “goodwill” basis between various shelter partners to be occurring, but is not otherwise documented in formal planning.

## **CONCLUSION**

Much has been accomplished despite numerous challenges. More importantly, VDSS and the state partner agencies continue to forge ahead to develop best practices and engage in opportunities to refine the state shelter plan and collaborate with local / regional shelter partners in planning and information sharing.

In addition to the many accomplishments noted in this report, there are more on the horizon. At the time of this writing, VDSS, VDEM and DGS have initiated an effort to completely overhaul the commodity contract process. This effort will identify what goods and services are required to open a shelter, what is required to sustain shelter operations, and what contracts may be required to support “only as needed” services. Unlike the current “order everything at once” approach, this is a completely new way of addressing commodities that should lead to a more cost-effective operation.

The Shelter Readiness Workshops co-facilitated by VDSS and VDEM in Spring 2021 yielded great insight into local planning efforts and needs, and are set to become a regular interaction with local shelter planners across the Commonwealth. The silos between planning at various jurisdictional levels are slowly being replaced by a bridge; this is the shelter system of the future that will help to increase efficiency in all shelter operations.

The recent VAREX exercise prompted requests by many partners to have VDSS conduct annual notification and activation drills as a way to reinforce the activation process, test the communications,

and get a snapshot of their current staffing capability. At the time of this writing information was still being collected for the After Action Report (AAR); once completed, it will be made widely available to all partner and local agencies. Furthermore, the virtual aspect of the exercise makes it relatively easy to replicate, and local and regional partners will be encouraged to utilize a similar model to exercise their activation and rostering practices, if they choose to do so.

The Emergency Workforce Coordinator position at VDSS, newly developed, has been tremendously helpful in recruiting and engaging workforce participants to support sheltering and other ESF 6 needs, while also identifying policy and protocol gaps and making recommendations for improvements. This work will in turn help to bolster recruitment and retention as we move forward.

VDSS is working to address the challenges previously identified. Funding for current shelter building assessments and identification of new facilities, CAD mapping for all shelter facilities, and acquiring additional resources to develop a basic shelter push pack would substantially improve shelter preparedness and capability. Identifying the appropriate contract solutions to support NCS operations will help to solidify that plan, and once that work is completed, the plan should be exercised to identify gaps and incorporate lessons learned. Despite its many setbacks, the ETN registration system holds much promise and is currently forecast to be available for the 2022 hurricane season.

With the support of the General Assembly and all partner agencies, this important work will continue to advance to ensure the health, wellbeing, and safety of the Commonwealth.