



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES
Office of the Commissioner

S. Duke Storen
Commissioner

December 2, 2021

MEMORANDUM

TO: Honorable Ralph Northam
Governor of Virginia

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

Honorable Luke E. Torian, Chair
House Appropriations Committee

Honorable Vanessa Walker Harris M.D.
Secretary of Health & Human Resources

Honorable Fran Bradford
Secretary of Education

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

Honorable K. Joseph Flores
Secretary of Finance

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

SUBJECT: Report on a Model Shelter Plan

I am pleased to submit the report on a model shelter plan, pursuant to Item 358 (B) of the 2020 Appropriation Act. If you have questions or need additional information concerning this report, please contact me.

SDS:kc

Report to the General Assembly

**Sheltering for Congregate Care
(Post-COVID)**

Model Shelter Report



**VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF
SOCIAL SERVICES**

December 2021

Preface

Item 358(B) of Chapter 1289 of the 2020 Appropriations Act establishes that “The Department of Social Services, in consultation with institutions of higher education, and with the assistance of the Virginia Department of Emergency Management and the Department of General Services, shall develop a model shelter plan to include but not limited to the process of mobilization and demobilization of the shelter; relocation of residents when a state shelter is deactivated; warehousing of pre-positioned supplies; potential use of existing resources and vendors already under contract with institutions of higher education; and cost estimates for resources that would be reimbursed by the Commonwealth. The Department shall submit a report on the model plan and its recommendations, including challenges implementing such a plan in all state shelters, by October 15, 2020, to the chairs of the House Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees, the Secretary of Health and Human Resources, the Secretary of Education, and the Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security, and the Secretary of Finance.”

This report, in accordance with Item 358(B), provides information on the Commonwealth’s emergency shelter plan in regard to current capability and potential adjustments to be made in the plan to better serve the Commonwealth. Due to response operations for the coronavirus pandemic, submission of this report was waived for 2020.

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Introduction

The current 2020 State Coordinated Regional Shelter (SCRS) Plan was developed from planning initiated in 2004. The plan has undergone regular updates and revisions and has developed substantially since its creation. In 2018, the Commonwealth opened state shelters for the first time in the wake of Hurricane Florence evacuation orders, and many lessons were learned. From that experience, much thought and discussion has gone into re-thinking the SCRS plan to allow for greater flexibility while containing costs for future sheltering operations.

The success of the SCRS plan depends in large part on the success of local and regional shelter planning and operations, as well as state planning and preparedness efforts. As incidents expand and shelter operations scale up, gaps and deficiencies at the local and regional level will directly impact SCRS operations, if activated; therefore, SCRS planning needs to be holistic in its approach. While local jurisdictions are responsible for their own shelter planning, it is wise to proactively understand and plan for known gaps throughout the shelter system. While the updated plan itself won't be able to address all known gaps, the dialogue in the development and planning for improvements has been helpful to better understand these localized issues and try to address for them through a wide variety of means, including improved education, wider collaboration, and deeper contextual review of policies, protocols, and procedures. Mentions of some of these gaps are included in this document to help provide additional context to the reader.

This document identifies new strategies to support the Commonwealth's SCRS shelter program in order to increase efficiencies and lower costs while ensuring the equitable delivery of services. The strategies are organized into the following categories:

1. Shelter Operational Phases and Commodities
2. Shelter Sites
3. Staffing
4. SCRS Transition Team
5. Shelter Consolidation, Relocation and Transition
6. Training

Some of the strategies in this report have already been instituted, such as staffing changes, updated training, and supplemental shelter education workshops. Other strategies are in progress, such as implementing operational phases, revising commodities, and developing a SCRS Transition Team; while others are still being explored, such as identifying additional shelter sites. Shelter planning is a fluid and reactive process; as information is learned through experience or best practices, the plan is updated accordingly. Thus, some of these strategies may be altered or exchanged as new information becomes available.

The strategies proposed in this report bring some significant changes and will require new thinking, planning, and training from all partner agencies participating in shelter planning.

Shelter Operational Phases and Commodities

Operational phases provide a framework and an easily recognized benchmark for SCRS partner agencies to organize and deploy their commodities. The current SCRS plan outlines three operational phases:

1. Life Saving (0-48 hours) - provides security; registration (including communication accessibility); shelter; limited cots for sleep; basic health, mental health, and accessibility for all residents; and food and water.
2. Life Sustaining (48-96 hours) - provides cots for all residents; hygiene kits; establishment of structured routines; and opportunities for children and families to participate in their own recovery.
3. Informational Needs (96+ hours) - provides support for residents who are not able to immediately return home post-event, including transition services; status of disaster and relief efforts; types of available assistance; and process of obtaining assistance.¹

While described in the plan, these three phases are not incorporated into the planning, activation or operational processes. Commodities are ordered in whole for the maximum capacity of the site(s) upon activating shelter operations, with the intent to have all supplies on hand when the shelter opens. An “all in” approach is very costly and may delay the opening of the shelter if supplies and equipment are held up at any point in the order or delivery process.

The plan update will simplify operations into a tiered two-phase concept, each having a significantly different approach to how shelter services and commodities are provided.

Events with notice (i.e., hurricanes) and no notice (i.e., tornadoes, etc.) will follow these operational phases:

- Tier 1 Immediate Phase (pre-event through 72 hours post-impact): provides security; registration (including communication accessibility); shelter; limited cots, prioritized for medical and access and functional needs (AFN) only; basic health, mental health, and accessibility services for all residents; and food and water. Messaging will encourage evacuees to bring their own bedding, hygiene, and comfort items if possible.
- Tier 2 Sustainment Phase (72 hours post-impact onward): provides cots for all residents; hygiene kits; establishment of structured routines; opportunities for children and families to participate in their own care and recovery; and support for residents who are not able to immediately return home post-event, including transition services. It is important to note that shelter populations decrease significantly after the Immediate Phase of shelter operations.

This two-tiered approach is cost effective for two reasons. First, it allows the Commonwealth to quickly initiate shelter operations without having to purchase all commodities and services for an unknown number of shelter residents prior to opening the shelter. Operations can be stood up with staff and a limited number of necessary items to be triaged to those most in need, including the full legally mandated necessities for residents with medical and AFN needs. By purchasing some items and services later, there can be a better estimate of actual need with less waste.

¹ State Coordinated Regional Shelter Plan Annex A: Congregate Shelters. (July, 2020).

Second, SCRS messaging can include information for evacuees to bring their own materials to support themselves in the shelter, if possible. As a common practice for evacuation and sheltering nationwide, this may help further reduce dependence on state resources.

Services and commodities necessary for state shelter operations will be assigned to the appropriate operational phase (Tier 1 or Tier 2). Other necessary services may be requested as needed in either phase. These could include goods, such as a particular item to meet a specific accommodation need (e.g., pediatric wheelchair, etc), or services (e.g., telephonic interpretation for a single evacuee or an on-site interpreter to support a large group with an identified language need).

Funding for advance purchase of durable equipment (such as cots, blankets, basic durable medical equipment, etc.) to support quick start up and initial operations for shelters is necessary to fully implement this two-tiered approach.

Commodities

This two-tiered approach has clear advantages. First, it will help to decrease the planning and implementation time in the activation timeline. Planning can account for a certain basic level of service in the Immediate Phase and can fill in the gaps in the Sustainment Phase. Operationally, this allows for a clearer picture of actual need and scale for commodity resources (i.e., only 300 people at a shelter that has capacity for 950).

As a planning precaution, if the event is expected to disrupt critical supply chains, the initial order could skip the limitations of the Immediate Phase instead move directly to the full commodities list of the Sustainment Phase at full capacity as a safety measure.

Second, having a cache of durable supplies on hand will help to quickly open shelters in the Immediate Phase while the remaining supplies are being ordered and dispatched for the Sustainment Phase. Durable goods include basic administrative supplies, cots, blankets, and durable medical equipment to support access and functional needs. These could be delivered as a whole to one shelter or parcelled out to multiple shelters to support critical needs in the Immediate Phase. The SCRS Plan will be updated to include appendices on warehousing and deploying this cache and, similar to the current plan, will also have commodity lists for each site updated by operational phase.

Finally, the two-tiered approach reduces waste by ordering sustainment commodities and services for actual population needs rather than shelter capacity. Shelter populations tend to decline quickly once the initial impact subsides, which is typically after the first 72 hours. As evacuees are assessed upon registering into the shelter and needs are identified, the need for full commodities will then be limited to those residents who are not able to quickly return home and will need additional support and services while they work to transition to other non-shelter solutions.

Contracting and Warehousing Supplies

VDSS, DGS and VDEM met with each shelter site in 2021 to discuss warehousing and contract support capabilities for shelter support. Virtually no interior warehouse space was available on shelter site campuses. Although some sites had room for container storage, the cost, security, viability and management of supplies in outdoor container storage were determined to be unreasonable. Similarly,

existing services and contract resources varied widely between sites. No viable solution was found that wouldn't incur additional logistical costs and management challenges.

VDEM warehouses (indoor), inventories, and manages a small cache of shelter supplies in Richmond that were leftover from the 2018 activation. VDEM has indicated that they are willing to continue to do so contingent on funding and available space. This is an issue that will need to be revisited as the new shelter plan is developed, but VDEM has been a willing partner in supporting logistics between shelter activations.

Cost Estimates

VDSS, DGS, and VDEM are developing a procurement strategy that conforms to the two-tier shelter operational process previously outlined in this document. This involves significant work with each of the state agency partners to determine what their operational needs will be for each of the phases, and to resolve any competing priorities and expectations between them. This work is in progress and we anticipate that a request for proposal will be open by October 2021, and contracts awarded by May 2022.

Shelter Sites

The use of Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) as state shelter sites poses significant challenges. Thirteen IHEs are identified in the current SCRS plan to serve as shelter sites for up to 30 days. Many participating IHEs have expressed concern that activating a state shelter will conflict with or possibly shut down campus operations. Each site has varying capabilities in terms of capacity (116 at the smallest shelter; 982 at the largest shelter), ADA accessibility, pet sheltering (six sites only), and other challenges. Furthermore, these sites are spread out across the state and will relocate evacuees many miles and hours away from their home communities, which will hinder their initial recovery efforts; this may also decrease their willingness and ability to seek shelter.

VDSS is currently exploring how to move SCRS operations from IHEs to other types of facilities. Utilizing the planning done by VDEM and VDH to stand up community vaccination centers (CVCs) in 2021, VDSS is working with VDEM to identify vacant large scale retail and other community spaces that are not currently being used for local or regional shelter operations. VDEM developed and is planning to maintain a list of these sites, to be updated annually or more frequently as vacant properties get leased or sold. These sites will have some of the same challenges found at the IHE shelters and require careful planning ; however, these sites offer flexibility in terms of keeping evacuees closer to their home communities, which will enable them to more quickly begin their recovery. Additionally, these sites will not impact IHE operations and infringe upon the educational and service needs of their students.

Where possible, VDSS will work with VDEM to identify opportunities to help localities form collaborative shelter site agreements between local jurisdictions and regional planning authorities to utilize locally-identified large sheltering sites in non-impacted areas. Additionally, VDSS also supports the development of host agreements directly between local / regional jurisdictions themselves to support evacuations within the Commonwealth; this is not an item to include in the updated plan but was born out of the development and dialogue in planning.

The SCRS plan should identify a method to open shelter sites sequentially, when and where possible, where one shelter is open and the next is on standby, instead of opening multiple shelters simultaneously. This will help to consolidate and improve services and reduce costs in staffing and commodities. Sequential opening will depend on a number of internal and external factors, and will need to be reviewed prior to each SCRS activation for feasibility. These factors include but are not limited to the location of the shelter; the size and needs of the expected evacuee population; the need for and availability of pet sheltering; the size and overall capability of the available shelter sites; the expected impact, actual impact, and potential recovery needs of the event; and expected impacts to supply chains.

During the COVID pandemic, non-congregate shelter (NCS) plans² were developed, and the state shelter plan will continue to maintain and expand on that capability. NCS utilizes hotels, motels, and other space to individually house vulnerable populations. In addition to public health emergencies and due to the overall cost of shelter operations, NCS might also be used for small incidents involving several dozen evacuees or large special needs communities that would strain the resources in congregate shelters. The state NCS plan identifies a process for contracting facilities, a virtual evacuee registration system, and provision of necessary wraparound services to meet access and functional, medical, behavioral health, and other needs.

Staffing

Ensuring that the SCRS is adequately staffed is a significant concern. The current plan outlines the number of staff needed at each site, but it is widely recognized that all SCRS partner agencies will be challenged to meet this need; and in fact, a Virtual Activation and Roster Exercise (VAREX), conducted in August 2021, confirmed staffing gaps across all SCRS partner agencies. Regular staff turnover, unfilled positions, and staff designation as Essential to agency work are but a few of the reasons there are insufficient numbers of staff assigned and prepared for these emergency roles. Additionally, some state agencies rely on local agency staff to support state operations. In the arena of sheltering, these same staff are often tasked to support local shelter operations and therefore would be unavailable to respond to a state request. Finally, in an emergency some staff will be affected by the emergency itself and will not be available to assist. These staffing issues and concerns are common at all levels of sheltering (local, regional, and state) and significantly impact the Commonwealth's ability to ensure maximum shelter capability.

In 2020, VDSS streamlined its shelter staffing roles to cross-train staff to handle multiple shelter functions. This reduced the overall number of staff required to operate a shelter because cross-trained staff members can transition to address changing operational needs of the site. VDSS has shared this information with local shelter planners to encourage similar capability and flexibility in their staffing plans with the goal of encouraging the use of statewide mutual aid to support staffing.

With the revitalization of the Adjunct Emergency Workforce (AEW) program in 2021, VDSS is training additional state staff to support shelter operations. The support of the AEW workforce is imperative, as

² State Coordinated Regional Shelter Plan Annex B: Non-Congregate Shelters. (VDSS). July, 2020.

VDSS has a significant role in the regular daily support of thousands of Virginians, as well as in recovery operations, and cannot fully devote all staffing resources solely to disaster response operations.

Additionally, the new SCRS plan will also incorporate roles for shelter residents to help support tasks within the shelter. These may include greeter, runner, hall monitor, and other simple roles that require little training and experience and have a low security risk. Resident support is a common practice in Red Cross shelters and provides residents a way to alleviate boredom and stress with productive use of their time. It also helps to facilitate individual recovery as it empowers shelter residents to be responders rather than victims through active participation in the shelter operation.

As different agencies have different responsibilities in supporting various aspects of the SCRS, the plan will require all shelter partner agencies to identify ways to augment their shelter staffing to ensure a robust workforce. This may include Memorandums of Agreement / Understanding with agencies directly for volunteer and/or nonprofit organizational support, requests through ESF17, and other avenues for support.

SCRS Transition Team

Supporting the transition of shelter residents back into their community is a critical service and nationally recognized best practice. The current SCRS Plan assigns the role of helping shelter residents initiate the recovery process to a transition team, but this resource has not been developed.

Using a Multi-Agency Shelter Transition Team (MASTT) framework developed and tested by several other states, VDSS will identify a MASTT planning team composed of a wide array of subject matter experts from across state and Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) agencies and develop a process to identify and support resident transition needs. The process will include transition casework, including interviewing residents to identify barriers and actively address immediate needs in order to transition them back to their local jurisdiction; developing data collection and reporting standards and tools; and developing a method to connect residents to case managers and resources in their local community.

ESF6 will continue to support local jurisdiction shelter transition needs as requested through WebEOC, as well as through regular / enhanced programs and channels, such as the Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP) and other benefits programs, and other agency or disaster relief programs.

Shelter Consolidation, Relocation and Transition

The current SCRS plan does not include information on how or when to consolidate or relocate shelters, and does not provide a detailed process to transition shelters. Maintaining multiple open SCRS for the duration of an event is expensive and can quickly drain even the most robust resources.

The new SCRS Plan will develop a process and protocol to consolidate and/or relocate multiple SCRS shelters into a single location or smaller footprint as soon as safe, practical, and cost-efficient to do so. This will include identifying an appropriate secondary site(s) and required resources, and preparing to

transition the operation into long-term sheltering if needed. Secondary sites should be located as close to the impact area as safely possible to afford residents better access to their home communities and networks to enhance their recovery.

If only a small number of residents remain in the shelter, the plan will develop a process to switch the operation to non-congregate sheltering (NCS) and relocate those residents to hotels close to their communities and demobilize the congregate shelter operation. Support and transition services will then be provided in the NCS setting as detailed in the NCS plan.

Training

The current plan mandates shelter staff training but does not specify training requirements. Previously, staff from all shelter partner agencies were provided access to the web-based *Introduction to the SCRS Plan* training, available in the Commonwealth of Virginia Learning Center (COVLC), and then were expected to complete role-specific agency-provided training afterward. Training was not tracked centrally, so it was unclear what courses were being provided, how often, and how many shelter staff were completing their requirements agency to agency. Furthermore, AEW staff were not provided access to training.

VDSS has made great strides in training this past year, and will incorporate these accomplishments into the new plan. In addition to the updated *Introduction to the SCRS Plan*³, currently accessible on the COVLC to all partner agencies and the AEW, all general staff (Shelter Specialists) are cross trained to perform multiple functions within the shelters. The Shelter Manager curriculum has also been updated, and all managerial roles are similarly cross-trained. Ongoing shelter management workshops support managerial skills in problem solving and decision making within the shelter. An additional course in access and functional needs in a shelter setting is currently in development and will be available to shelter staff from all partner agencies once it is complete.

Course modality is also being expanded and will be incorporated into the new plan. Web-based courses have been the staple of SCRS training, and will continue to be a key component of training in the new plan. As feasible by subject matter and audience, courses will also be offered via in-person or virtual classroom and recorded for additional staff to complete or refresh their training. Just-in-time (JIT) training materials are also being developed to quickly train new staff and refresh current staff when the SCRS is activated.

The new plan will set forth basic training requirements, including course requirements by agency and position, training cycles, and tracking and reporting to help ensure that agencies are meeting their obligations to prepare their staff for shelter operations. All of this material will be located in an appendix to the SCRS plan.

³ VDSS OEM1101 Introduction to the SCRS Plan. (2020). Available in the Commonwealth of Virginia Learning Center.

Conclusion

The current 2020 SCRS Plan continues to be updated with best practices and lessons learned. Nonetheless, in re-thinking congregate care sheltering, many parts of the plan will need to be completely overhauled to incorporate these new processes and protocols. The SCRS Plan is required to be updated once every four years, and the next update is due in 2024. This will allow time to adequately flesh out all details in making these substantial changes to the current plan.

Many of the strategies mentioned above are already in process or in planning to be implemented. The opportunity to work through and evaluate these strategies before they become part of the plan is invaluable; making numerous large changes in planning without testing could result in a poor outcome. Through multi-agency stakeholder planning discussions, training, and exercise, VDSS continues working to ensure operational success to fully support the sheltering needs of the Commonwealth in an emergency.

Concurrently, dialogue with local / regional shelter partners will continue to illuminate gaps in sheltering at the jurisdictional level. VDSS has partnered with VDEM to facilitate these discussions with the goal of helping local jurisdictions close these gaps and thereby further reduce the need for state shelter operations.

Ultimately, reducing the need for and increasing the efficiency of the SCRS is a win for the Commonwealth, and new strategies in planning can help achieve this goal.