



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES
Office of the Commissioner

Danny TK Avula MD, MPH
Commissioner

January 30, 2024

MEMORANDUM

TO: The Honorable Glenn Youngkin
Governor of Virginia

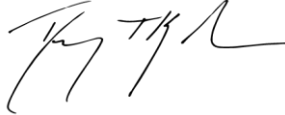
The Honorable John Littel
Secretary of Health & Human Services

The Honorable Robert Mosier
Secretary of Public Safety & Homeland Security

The Honorable Louise L. Lucas
Chair, Senate Finance & Appropriations Committee

The Honorable Luke E. Torian
Chair, Senate Finance & Appropriation Committee

Michael Maul, Director
Department of Planning & Budget

FROM: Danny TK Avula MD, MPH 

SUBJECT: Report on Emergency Shelter Readiness

This report is submitted in compliance with Item 349.A. of the 2022 Appropriation Act, which states:

A. By October 1 of each year, 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 and Appropriations Committees.

If you should have questions, please contact me at (804) 726-7011.

DA:kc

Virginia Department of Social Services
Annual Report on Emergency Shelter Readiness
October 2023

Executive Summary

This report, in accordance with Item 349(A) of the 2022 Appropriations Act, provides a status update on the Commonwealth's emergency shelter capabilities and readiness. This report is divided into two priorities: 1) enhancing local sheltering; and 2) maintaining the State Coordinated Regional Shelter (SCRS) plan.

To enhance local sheltering, the Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM) has contracted a State Shelter Project Coordinator to draft a strategy framework for sheltering across the Commonwealth. VDEM has partnered with the VDSS Office of Emergency Management to lead a working group to define requirements, measure gaps, and present actionable solutions to address sheltering needs in Virginia. Local, regional, and tribal partners have been invited to the working group to ensure an inclusive planning process.

The State Coordinated Regional Shelter (SCRS) Program has improved since the last report, but challenges remain in supporting individual localities in the case of a catastrophic event. Annex C: Resident Transition of the SCRS Plan was completed in November 2022. Most of the biennial shelter site assessments were completed in 2023. The Emergency Workforce continues to grow, with a boost from VDEM's Adjunct Emergency Workforce (AEW). The first full-scale exercise for the SCRS Plan since 2014 was conducted in June 2023. The state shelter coordinator traveled to two disaster-experienced states, Louisiana and Texas, to learn best practices in disaster sheltering for Virginia. The Virginia Department of Social Services Office of Emergency Management completes this report with an updated list of priority recommendations that are actionable starting in the upcoming year.

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**Virginia Department of Social Services
Annual Report on Emergency Shelter Readiness
October 2023**

Report Mandate

Item 349.A. of the 2022 Appropriation Act requires:

A. By October 1 of each year, 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 and Appropriations Committees.

Background & Highlights

Emergency sheltering begins at the local level and may expand to the regional and state level. Thus, local, regional, and state partners need to coordinate planning, response, and recovery efforts to effectively manage resources to meet the basic needs of all evacuees.

The Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) made the following recommendations to improve the Commonwealth's Shelter Capabilities and Readiness in the 2022 Report to the General Assembly:

- VDEM should consider gathering specific data from localities on shelter capabilities, not just capacities, through the LCAR Report to better understand gaps.
- VDEM and VDSS should work together to create and publicize sheltering support templates for localities to utilize in a disaster through the Statewide Mutual Aid program.
- VDSS and DGS should work together to identify and prepare contracts/agreements for additional or alternative SCRS sites.
- VDEM should explore options for developing a volunteer management software system or database to manage the EW/AEW.
- VDEM and VDSS should work together to explore strategies to expand EW/AEW with motivated recruitment and prepare them through comprehensive training courses.

While work has begun to implement these recommendations, the solutions required to address the persistent sheltering gaps in the Commonwealth will require continued effort through a multi-year timeline.

VDSS is collaborating with VDEM to create a Commonwealth Shelter Strategy Framework to standardize sheltering requirements across the Commonwealth, identify gaps in the sheltering system, and recommend actionable solutions to minimize the sheltering gaps. This project is expected to be complete in May 2024 and supports the recommendations made in 2022 to assist localities in their shelter planning and operations.

VDSS' main responsibility in the Commonwealth's sheltering system is managing the SCRS plan and its operations during activation. VDSS has worked on both increasing capacity and

improving capabilities in the SCRS plan. The agency completed most of the site assessments at the Institutes of Higher Education (IHE) for more accurate capacity counts and to ensure that the SCRS plan meets programmatic and physical requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). VDSS is also currently working on identifying additional and alternative SCRS sites with VDEM and the Department of General Services (DGS).

The Emergency Workforce (EW), made up of VDSS personnel who volunteer for disaster deployment in mass care operations, is bolstered by VDEM's Adjunct Emergency Workforce (AEW). The AEW is a VDEM program to recruit employees from any state agency to volunteer for a disaster response role. Both workforces have grown in the past year. All AEW and EW members receive in-depth training to be able to deploy during a disaster response. Motivated recruitment has resulted in a larger volunteer workforce. The training and exercise program for shelter staff continues to grow robust as more exercises are incorporated into the training cycle every year.

Commonwealth Shelter Strategy Project

According to VDEM's 2022 LCAR Survey Summary, 70% of local jurisdictions were "confident" or "completely confident" in their sheltering capabilities. Forty-nine percent of localities reported they would require external assistance, most frequently staffing assistance, to open or sustain shelter operations (VDEM, 2022). This is an improvement from the 2021 LCAR report, where 86% of localities reported they would require external assistance to maintain shelter operations (VDEM, 2021).

VDEM contracted a Shelter Project Coordinator in March 2022 for a two-year project to develop a shelter strategy for the commonwealth. This project is expected to be complete in May 2024. VDSS is working with VDEM to lead a working group of local, regional, tribal, and state partners to define sheltering standards, identify capability targets, understand sheltering gaps across the Commonwealth, and to propose actionable solutions to minimize sheltering gaps. The sheltering strategy framework is the first step to long-term sheltering stability in Virginia. The next step will be prioritizing capability gaps and creating implementation plans for proposed solutions. It will be crucial to continue the work started with the strategy framework so that solutions are implemented effectively throughout Virginia.

State Coordinated Regional Shelter Program

This past year, the SCRS program has focused on completing Annex C: Resident Transition, performing plan maintenance in updating site addendums with new site plans, and bolstering the workforce with a diverse range of sheltering trainings.

Annex C: Shelter Resident Transition

In November 2022, The [SCRS Plan Annex C: Resident Transition](#) was completed and went into effect. This annex describes the procedures and processes to support evacuees with returning to their homes or finding new housing (transitional or permanent) after staying at a SCRS. This annex is a link from response activities to recovery steps. Resident transition requires complex resource coordination and therefore involves various parties to ensure all required services are

provided. Signatories of the annex include various state and federal agencies, and the American Red Cross.

Shelter Sites

The SCRS program includes 13 different shelter sites located at IHEs. Some sites have a single facility available to the program, some sites have multiple facilities. Currently, the SCRS Program has a total capacity to shelter 5,411 people in general population dormitories and 846 people in medical population dormitories. Two large facilities are currently offline, the Convocation Center at James Madison University and War Memorial at Virginia Tech. This temporarily removes space for 981 evacuees. 2,092 total pets can be sheltered across the shelter sites. Four out of 13 sites do not have spaces identified for pet sheltering: Christopher Newport University, Patrick Henry Community College, University of Virginia, and William & Mary. The capacity of each SCRS facility is presented in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1. SCRS Site Capacities	General Capacity	Medical Capacity	Pet Capacity
Facility Name			
Christopher Newport University - Freeman Center	681	108	0
George Mason University - Fieldhouse	797	0	0
George Mason University – HUB	0	0	169
George Mason University - Recreation and Athletic Center	483	144	0
<i>James Madison University - Atlantic Union Bank Center (New Facility)</i>	100	86	0
James Madison University - Convocation Center (Temporarily Offline)	462	12	0
<i>James Madison University - Godwin Hall (New Facility)</i>	290	0	143
Longwood University - Brock Commons Garage	0	0	664
<i>Longwood University - Recreation Center (New Facility)</i>	211	0	0
Longwood University - Willet Hall	0	194	0
Patrick Henry Community College - Philpott Technical Center	0	28	0
Patrick Henry Community College - Stone Hall	139	0	0
Patrick Henry Community College - Walker Café (Dining Space Only)	0	0	0
Paul D. Camp Community College - Main Building	5	0	0
Paul D. Camp Community College - Workforce Development Center	152	12	0
Richard Bland College - Barn Theater	0	0	75
Richard Bland College - Statesman Hall	113	18	0
University of Virginia - North Grounds Recreation Center	184	34	0
Virginia Commonwealth University - Bowe Street Parking Deck	0	0	285
Virginia Commonwealth University - Siegel Center	549	84	0
Virginia Commonwealth University - Sports Medicine Center	0	0	0
Virginia Horse Center	0	0	230
Virginia Military Institute - Cameron Hall	144	4	0
Virginia State University - Daniel Gymnasium	203	14	0
<i>Virginia State University - Multipurpose Center (New Facility)</i>	300	86	0
Virginia State University - Randolph Farm	0	0	263
Virginia Tech - Cassell Coliseum	345	0	0
Virginia Tech - McComas	207	10	0
Virginia Tech - War Memorial Gym (Temporarily Offline)	507	0	0
Virginia Tech – Alphin-Stuart Livestock Center	0	0	263
William & Mary - McCormack-Nagelsen Tennis Center	508	4	0
Total	5411	826	2092

Site Assessments

In 2023, site assessments were completed at 12 of the 13 SCRS sites. Site assessments were conducted with representatives from partner agencies in attendance for input on specific functional areas. Virginia Department of Health (VDH), Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS), Virginia State Police (VSP), VDEM (Logistics and Regional personnel), Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (VDBHDS), and Virginia Information Technology Agency (VITA) were all represented in at least one site assessment.

Twenty-six of 30 facilities now have new site plans complete with ADA assessments and building code reviews. Three IHEs offered new facilities to add to their shelter sites. These are italicized in Table 1. New shelter capacities were calculated at each facility with considerations for accessibility and logistical efficiency. AutoCAD diagrams were created for shelter layouts at each facility. The only school without a completed site assessment is Virginia Tech. Their largest shelter facility is offline and under renovation until Summer 2024. VDSS plans to have all site assessments complete by June 2024.

Development of additional and alternative shelter sites remains a key focus at the state level. Additional sites are needed to boost capacity for large-scale evacuations, while alternative sites are needed to reduce dependence on and disruptions to IHEs for shelter operations.

VDSS continues to collaborate with partner agencies, including VDEM and DGS, to identify additional and alternative solutions. At a minimum, VDSS proposes that the three partnered agencies establish and maintain a list of potential “just-in-time” facilities. These facilities would not be contracted until a disaster response activation required state sheltering. During non-disaster times, the list would require maintenance as facilities would need to pass an initial assessment to determine that ADA and building code requirements are met and then be routinely updated to reflect availability and facility changes.

Commodities

Commodities include the supplies, services, and equipment needed to support shelter operations from activation through demobilization. In January 2023, VDSS, VDEM and DGS secured two contracts for Just-In-Time State Coordinated Regional Shelter Services and Commodities for all 13 SCRS sites. The contractors have participated in the SCRS planning process by attending site assessments and providing insight into the logistics details unique to each location. In 2024, VDSS plans to submit amendments to the existing contracts based on feedback from all partner agencies.

Staffing

Shelter staffing is a critical component of the SCRS plan, and staff are often in short supply for emergency activations. VDSS and its shelter planning partners have made strides towards closing the gap in staffing and ensure a readily available emergency workforce.

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 and general population support (VDSS);
- Support for medical and environmental health services (VDH and the Medical Reserve Corps)
- Pet sheltering (VDACS)
- Security (VSP)
- Behavioral health (DBHDS)
- Access and functional needs support (VDEM);
- Information technology (VITA)
- Facility management, Public Information Officer (PIO), and fire watch staff (IHEs).

Table 2 demonstrates how many staff would be needed at each shelter site. These figures have not changed since the last report. A more detailed list of required staff can be found in each site’s commodity list.

Table 2. SCRS Staff Requirements (24 hour period)

Site Name	DSS Shelter Management Team	DSS General Staff	Total DSS Staff	Total Staff Including Partner Agencies
Christopher Newport	6	50	56	202
George Mason University	8	78	86	281
James Madison University	6	28	34	155
Longwood University	6	22	28	114
Paul D. Camp Community College	6	16	22	94
Patrick Henry Community College	6	14	20	98
Richard Bland College	8	16	24	127
University of Virginia	12	54	66	268
Virginia Commonwealth University	6	40	46	175
Virginia Military Institute	6	18	24	133
Virginia State University	6	20	26	113
Virginia Tech	8	52	60	185
College of William and Mary	6	36	42	184
Totals	90	444	534	2129

VDSS continues to expand the EW and supplement staffing capabilities with the AEW. The AEW is a VDEM program to recruit employees from any state agency to volunteer for a disaster response role. One of the options for AEW is to become a SCRS Shelter Specialist. Between the AEW and the EW, there are currently 321 staff signed up for the shelter specialist program. Of

those 321 people, 26 are trained as part of the Shelter Management Team, 95 have completed their training and are deployable, and 222 could be deployed with “just-in-time” training.

To support recruitment, the VDSS Emergency Workforce Coordinator has been meeting directly with each VDSS department to share information about the program and generate interest in participation. Also, VDSS conducts a cultural orientation every month for new employees. The VDSS Emergency Workforce Coordinator presents information about the EW at every cultural orientation.

VDSS currently utilizes a spreadsheet to manage personal information, volunteer role, training needed/completed, exercise participation, Statewide Alert Network (SWAN) response, deployment status based on training completion, and follow up outreach for those who haven’t responded to training, exercise, or SWAN messaging. This system is cumbersome and unnecessarily labor intensive to maintain. VDEM has hired a contractor to build a software program to manage the AEW, which could be replicated by VDSS to manage the EW. The VDSS Emergency Workforce Coordinator works closely with the VDEM AEW coordinator to recruit shelter specific AEW members and provide input into the development of the AEW software.

Training and Exercises

Preparing staff to support SCRS operations is critical to success. VDSS training includes getting the people ready for deployment and providing them with the knowledge and tools they need to be successful while deployed. Proactively identifying and developing material to support training needs is important to not only prepare staff, but also to build morale and team camaraderie in advance of a deployment. This is accomplished through interactive training that encourages participation, solicits ideas for improvement, and addresses the concerns of the workforce.

Current training requirements are that all AEW/EW staff complete basic training once every three years and take one optional course of their choice per year in between basic training. There are two existing required courses in basic training, the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) 1101: Introduction to the SCRS Plan and OEM 1103: Shelter Specialist. VDSS now also requires all EW staff to complete the SWAN Overview and How-To Guide, which provides an orientation to the SWAN system and details how to properly respond and collect information.

Optional courses and ongoing training opportunities include:

- Access and Functional Needs (AFN) Assistance in a Mass Care Setting, which provides a basic overview of supporting individuals with AFN in shelters and other mass care activities;
- Psychological First Aid (PFA), which outlines basic self-care activities for survivors of and staff responding to an emergency event;
- Radio Use Training, which teaches people how to operate a radio;
- Trauma Informed Care (TICA), which focuses on a methodical approach to address stressful situations and interactions using empathy and compassion;
- Shelter Management Team (SMT) Orientation, which trains interested and qualified shelter specialists to be shift supervisors; and
- SMT Workshops which allow staff to get acquainted and work together in management and problem solve via scenario-based training.

Of the 95 members of the workforce who have completed all required training, 53 have also taken one or more optional courses in the past year. This demonstrates active participation and dedication from the workforce to the sheltering mission.

Additionally, VDSS conducted several training education and exercise events to reinforce training concepts, including:

- A deployment preparedness exercise (virtual) encouraged the EW to review both the contents of their “Go Kit” and their personal emergency plans for their family when they are called up to serve;
- EW/AEW members in the Shelter Manager Team Cadre attended the site assessment at the Virginia Commonwealth University and simulated an opening facility walkthrough;
- [The Virtual Activation and Roster Exercise \(VAREX\) 2022 and 2023](#) engaged the EW/AEW to respond to simulated deployment messaging. VAREX also allowed all partner agencies to get a “snapshot” of their actual staffing availability, as all agency staff respond in real time with their actual availability.
- [The VT Full-Scale Exercise](#) demonstrated partner agencies’ abilities to fulfill their roles and responsibilities in a SCRS activation at Virginia Tech’s McComas Hall. Two shifts were truncated and simulated in a seven-hour window so that shift changes could also be tested. The exercise was valuable practice for the participating staff and provided critical insight into areas of improvement within the SCRS plan.

VDSS continues to maintain a schedule of mostly virtual training sessions because they provide greater flexibility and range in access for EW members. In the upcoming year, VDSS plans to incorporate more in-person meetings and while maintain virtual training opportunities. This should promote educational, team building experiences that connect existing staff to the EW program.

Exercises

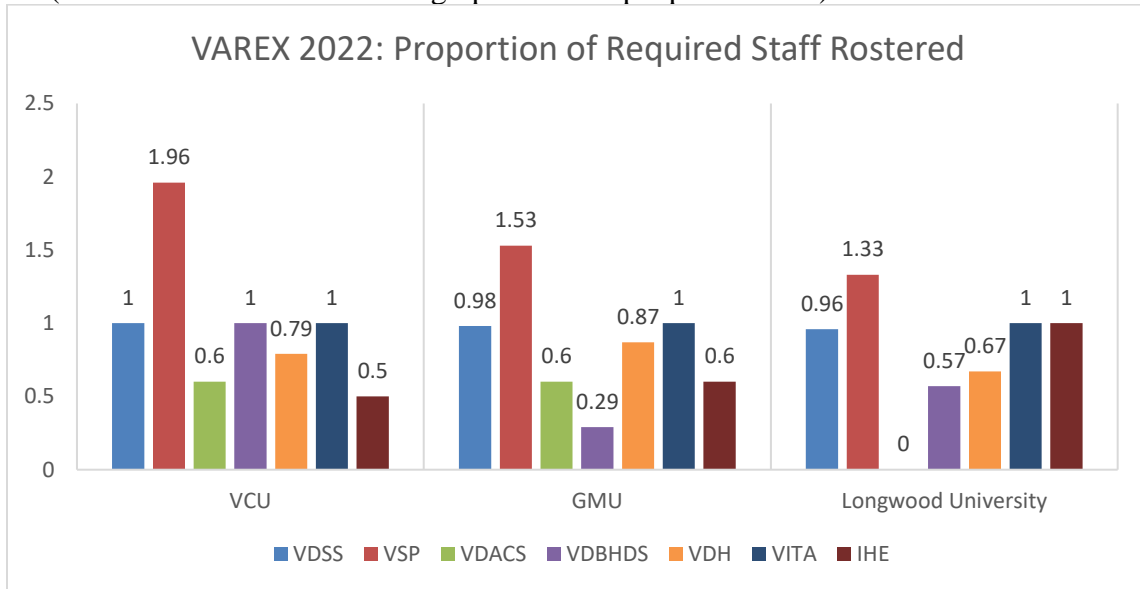
VAREX

VAREX is an annual exercise that began in 2021. It allows SCRS partners to practice their communications and rostering procedures and results in a snapshot of partner staffing capabilities.

In the 2021, VAREX, VDSS could staff enough shelters through the EW to support 1,075 evacuees. In the August 2022, VAREX, VDSS could staff three shelters for 1,454 evacuees. In the February 2023, VAREX, VDSS could nearly staff four shelter facilities for 2082 evacuees. Graphs 1a and 1b demonstrate by year the proportion of required staff rostered by each participating agency at each activated site. George Mason University was activated for both iterations of the exercise, however, in Fall 2022, the Fieldhouse (capacity: 797) was offline.

Graph 1a: Proportion of Required Staff Rostered in VAREX 2022

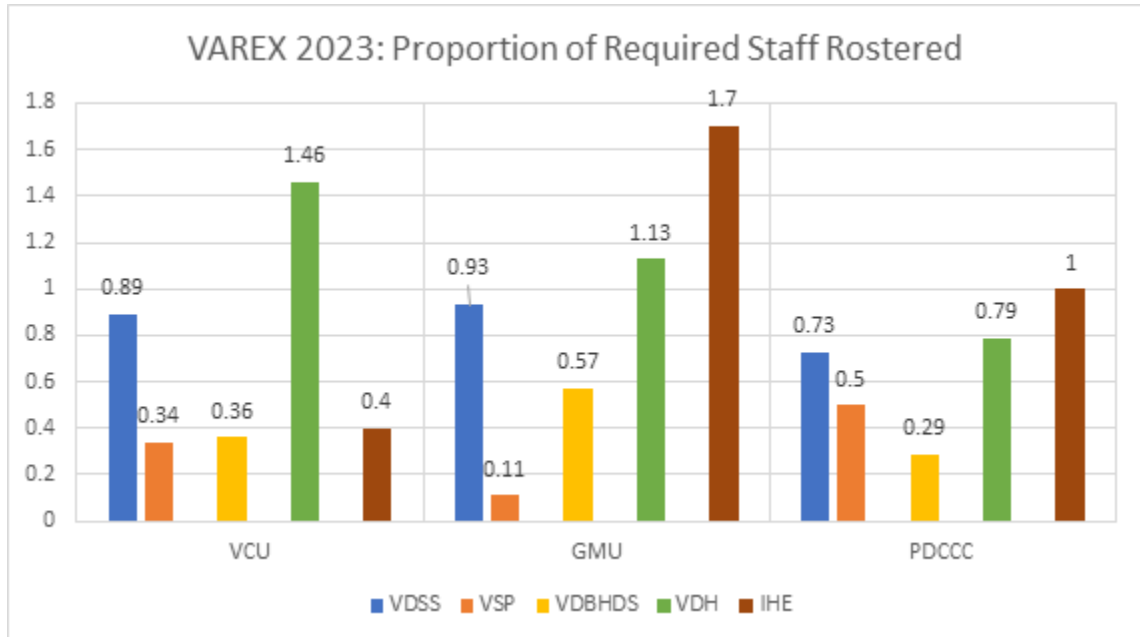
(Note: VDEM removed from graph due to 0 people rostered)



Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), George Mason University (GMU) (RAC and HUB only), Longwood University: 1,454 capacity total (general + medical)

Graph 1b: Proportion of Required Staff Rostered in VAREX 2023

(Note: VITA, VDACS, and VDEM removed from graph due to 0 people rostered)



GMU, VCU, Paul D. Camp Community College – 2,082 capacity total (general + medical)

VDSS' ability to staff increasing numbers of evacuees during these exercises emphasizes the growth in the EW and AEW.

VAREX is a valuable exercise to keep partner contacts updated, keep partner agencies engaged, and to better understand SCRS staffing capabilities.

Virginia Tech Full Scale Exercise

On June 8, 2023, VDSS organized a full-scale exercise of one shelter facility at Virginia Tech's McComas Hall and one pet shelter registration at the Public Safety Building. All partner agencies except VITA participated in the exercise. Community members volunteered as evacuees seeking shelter and a shuttle transported people between the human shelter and the pet shelter.

Players who responded to the feedback survey rated the exercise as being 3.94/5 stars when asked how helpful the exercise was to them. Evacuee actors rated the shelter staff players as 4.25/5 stars in their ability to support evacuee needs. They rated the realism of the scenarios they were asked to act out as 4.14/5 stars.

After the exercise, partner agencies identified the following as key areas for improvement:

- Improve the registration process by streamlining repetitive questions between VDSS, VDH, and VDACS forms, and providing better accommodations for language interpretation (including American Sign Language), privacy and seated waiting spaces.
- Clarify medical assessment and triage processes during registration.
- Increase training for the Shelter Management Team, including coordination exercises between agency leads, communication demonstrations and drills.
- Adjust commodities contract for changes to items required at activation.
- Modify roles and responsibilities of the PIO to include VDEM
- Update shelter signage kits

This exercise should be conducted every two years and is scheduled next for 2025.

Shelter Registration

VDSS leveraged existing software to create a Microsoft PowerApps registration tool. This registration tool, the Evacuee Accountability System (EVACS), is a temporary solution for electronic registration until a more universal system can be created. EVACS is limited to use for VDSS staff only due to sharing restrictions. VDSS and VDEM continue to work towards identify an electronic registration system that could be used statewide by all shelter providers, from local jurisdictions to state level shelters.

Lessons Learned from Other States

The State Shelter Coordinator deployed to Tallahassee, Florida when Hurricane Ian devastated Florida to serve on the State Shelter Task Force in October 2022. The experience was valuable in

understanding the impacts of relationships between local jurisdictions and the state of Florida, the need for accurate reporting from localities to the state, and the urgency for Multi-Agency Transition Teams in shelters. Florida also presented a solution for alternative shelter spaces by leveraging partnerships with private sector entities to develop new facilities that can serve as state shelters.

In April 2023, the State Shelter Coordinator traveled to Louisiana for the National Hurricane Convention and to learn from the Louisiana State Shelter Program managed by the Department of Child and Family Services, Office of Emergency Preparedness. Due to the frequent need for sheltering in Louisiana, they have justified the cost of maintaining facilities dedicated to sheltering year-round. The main facilities for sheltering are located at IHEs, but they are buildings specifically built for state sheltering, funded by the state, which the IHE can rent out as event space when it is not needed as a shelter. Louisiana also has a proactive hand in supporting local jurisdictions with signing Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with each other to support local sheltering. Louisiana has historically provided shelter improvement funds to parishes who agree to shelter other counties in the case of mass evacuation. The state had to intervene and facilitate local MOUs otherwise, no one would sign any agreements.

The lack of local MOUs for host sheltering is a significant gap in the Commonwealth of Virginia's sheltering system. If the Commonwealth can incentivize and coordinate agreements between localities to host shelter each other, the burden on the SCRS plan would be alleviated. [The Commonwealth Shelter Strategy](#) aims to present solutions to initiate host sheltering in Virginia, incorporating best practices learned from Louisiana and Florida.

Conclusion

Various steps have been taken to improve sheltering capabilities and readiness in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Actions taken have been either to enhance local sheltering capabilities or to maintain and increase the capabilities of the SCRS plan.

VDSS makes the following recommendations to improve the Commonwealth's Shelter Capabilities and Readiness:

- *VDSS and VDEM should work together to complete the Shelter Strategy Framework Project*
 - o *Define sheltering standards in Virginia.*
 - o *Establish capability targets.*
 - o *Identify actionable solutions to minimize sheltering gaps.*
- *VDSS and VDEM should work together to continue the work from the Shelter Strategy Framework Project by creating prioritized implementation plans for identified solutions.*
- *VDSS and DGS should work together to create a list of potential "just-in-time" SCRS sites and complete programmatic assessments of each potential site.*
- *VDSS should develop a volunteer management software system or database to manage the EW and the AEW.*

- *VDSS should continue to expand EW/AEW with motivated recruitment and prepare them through comprehensive training courses and exercises.*
- *VDSS and VDEM should work together to identify, find alternative funding for, and implement a universal state and local electronic shelter registration software program.*

These recommendations should address the gaps identified in this report and should improve the state of sheltering in the Commonwealth of Virginia. It is important to note that these recommendations are not exhaustive, and actions taken to improve sheltering should not be limited to just these focused suggestions. These recommendations are not time-limited and may take more than one year to complete.

Reference List

Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM). (2021). *Local Capabilities and Readiness Survey Summary*.

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