



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Office of the Commissioner

Kevin Erskine
Commissioner

November 5, 2025

MEMORANDUM

TO: The Honorable Glenn Youngkin
Governor of Virginia

The Honorable Janet V. Kelly
Secretary of Health & Human Services

The Honorable Marcus Anderson
Secretary of Public Safety & Homeland Security

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

The Honorable Luke E. Torian
Chair, House Appropriations Committee

Michael Maul, Director
Department of Planning & Budget

FROM: Kevin Erskine 

SUBJECT: Annual Report on Emergency Shelter Capabilities and Readiness

This report is submitted in compliance with Item 333.A. of the 2025 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 have questions, please contact me at (804) 726-7011.

KE:kc

Attachment



COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA EMERGENCY SHELTER CAPABILITIES AND READINESS

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COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA EMERGENCY SHELTER CAPABILITIES AND READINESS

A Report for the Virginia General Assembly

October 1, 2025

REPORT MANDATE

Item 333 (A) of Chapter 725 of the 2024 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 and Appropriations Committees.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes the efforts of the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) Office of Emergency Management (OEM) to manage the state level program as well as collaborative work between VDSS OEM and other jurisdictions and agencies to improve shelter capabilities and to increase overall readiness throughout the Commonwealth. The State Managed Shelter Program currently has the capacity to shelter 6,940 people and 1,806 pets.

VDSS continues to make the following collaborative recommendations to improve the Commonwealth’s Shelter Capabilities and Readiness:

- Create a list of potential “just-in-time” local and SMS sites and complete programmatic assessments of each potential site.
- Continue to develop the Emergency Workforce (EW) and Adjunct Emergency Workforce (AEW) with motivated recruitment and prepare them through comprehensive training courses and exercises.
- Continue the work from the Shelter Strategy Framework Project by creating prioritized implementation plans for identified solutions.
- Identify, fund, and implement a universal state and local electronic shelter registration software program.

About VDSS and State Managed Shelters

The Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) partners with local departments of social services and community organizations, to promote the well-being of children and families across the Commonwealth. We proudly serve alongside nearly 13,000 state and local human services professionals throughout the Social Services System, who ensure that thousands of Virginia’s most vulnerable citizens have access to the best services and benefits available to them.

Together, we work each day to serve, empower, and create opportunities for brighter futures.

State Managed Shelters are activated by the Governor when local shelters are overwhelmed in the face of a catastrophic disaster. SMS operations are large, complex and vital! VDSS manages State Managed Shelters and requires extensive multi-agency coordination to effectively provide safe respite for people in need.

DEFINITIONS

Adjunct Emergency Workforce (AEW)

The Adjunct Emergency Workforce (AEW) provides opportunities for state government employees to support the Commonwealth's Emergency Response and Recovery activities. During a declared emergency, qualified AEW participants may be offered temporary reassignment to close critical staffing gaps in Virginia Emergency Support Team (VEST) agencies. The AEW may be called upon to assist the public in a variety of ways including sheltering support and providing other essential emergency services.

Emergency Workforce (EW)

The VDSS Emergency Workforce is a team comprised of agency staff who choose to assist with state level disaster response and recovery during major events that affect the Commonwealth. The VDSS Emergency Workforce is trained to work in a variety of roles. OEM manages the VDSS Emergency Workforce Program.

Just-in-Time

A management strategy that aims to increase efficiency and decrease waste by receiving goods only as they are needed *and* keeping minimal inventory on hand to reduce storage costs.

State Managed Shelter (SMS)

A type of disaster shelter managed by VDSS and operated by partner state agencies. SMS are activated by the Governor when localities are overwhelmed and unable to provide shelter for their residents.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Virginia is at risk for a variety of natural, technological, and national security hazards, which pose a significant threat to the people of the Commonwealth. Such hazards include, but are not limited to, hurricanes, severe storms, floods, wildfires, winter storms, nuclear power plant incidents, transportation and other hazardous material (HAZMAT) incidents, and terrorist attacks. These hazards have the potential to displace people from their homes. Sheltering is a local responsibility first. When the needs of a displaced population exceed the capabilities of the localities and regions, the state plan can be activated.

VDSS Office of Emergency Management (OEM) manages the State Managed Shelter SMS program to ensure that anyone in the Commonwealth of Virginia who is seeking shelter during a major disaster has access to a safe, secure facility that meets basic sanitary requirements. Pre-identified shelter sites for general, medical, and pet sheltering across the Commonwealth are maintained through the SMS plan. The SMS plan is also operable at sites identified "just in time." The SMS plan can be activated in anticipation of a notice event or in reaction to an incident.

VDSS OEM does work beyond the SMS plan to support local sheltering capabilities through collaborative efforts such as the Commonwealth Shelter Strategy Framework and other initiatives.

CONTACTS

Author

Tina Wang, State Shelter Coordinator

Tina.wang@dss.virginia.gov, 804.659.9457

Commonwealth Of Virginia Emergency Shelter Capabilities And Readiness

SECTION 1 STATE MANAGED SHELTER PROGRAM

VDSS OEM maintains the State Managed Shelter (SMS) Plan on a routine schedule. The SMS Program maintains its readiness state through scheduled plan updates, extensive volunteer management and recruitment for the Emergency Workforce, and a robust training and exercise program for shelter staff and partner agencies.

VDSS recommends the following item for the SMS program to improve the Commonwealth's shelter capabilities and readiness:

- Continue to develop the Emergency Workforce (EW) and Adjunct Emergency Workforce (AEW) with motivated recruitment and prepare them through comprehensive training courses and exercises.

CURRENT CAPACITY AND CAPABILITY

The State Managed Shelter capacity is measured by the number of people that can be sheltered in facilities maintained at various participating Institutes of Higher Education (IHE). The current capacity of each pre-identified IHE site is demonstrated in Table 1. Capacities are separated by population categories: General, Medical, and Pet. VDSS is primarily responsible for the overall operations of a shelter and the general population dormitory. The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) is primarily responsible for the medical needs population. The Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) is primarily responsible for the pet population.

Table 1: Current Capacity of SMS Facilities

Facility Name	General Capacity	Medical Capacity	Pet Capacity
Christopher Newport University - Freeman Center	681	110	0
George Mason University - Fieldhouse	797	0	0
George Mason University - HUB	0	0	170
George Mason University - Recreation and Athletic Center	483	148	0
James Madison University - Godwin Hall	290	0	143
Longwood University - Brock Commons Garage	0	0	664
Longwood University - Recreation Center	211	0	0
Longwood University - Willet Hall	0	203	0
Patrick & Henry Community College - Philpott Technical Center	0	32	0
Patrick & Henry Community College - Stone Hall	139	0	0
Patrick & Henry Community College - Walker Cafe	0	0	0
Paul D. Camp Community College - Main Building	0	0	75
Paul D. Camp Community College - Workforce Development Center	72	14	0
Richard Bland College - Barn Theater	0	0	75
Richard Bland College - Statesman Hall	101	24	0
UVA - North Grounds Recreation Center	184	36	0
VCU - Bowe Street Parking Deck	0	0	285
VCU - Siegel Center	549	84	0
VCU- Sports Medicine Center	0	0	0
Virginia Horse Center	0	0	230
Virginia Military Institute - Cameron Hall	144	9	0
Virginia State University - Multipurpose Center	330	118	0
Virginia State University - Randolph Farm Service Center and Head House	0	0	45
Virginia Tech – McComas Hall	207	10	0
Virginia Tech – War Memorial Coliseum	224	140	0
Virginia Tech - Alphin-Stuart Livestock Arena	0	0	263
William & Mary - McCormack-Nagelsen Tennis Center	508	4	0
Total	5,754	1,186	1,806

The capability of State Managed Shelters is determined by the availability of essential resources needed to operate a shelter. The annual Virtual Activation and Rostering Exercise (VAREX) provides the Department with the most accurate status of staffing capability. This year, VAREX was conducted in March. VDSS demonstrated adequate staffing for three sites (George Mason University, Virginia Military Institute, and Richard Bland College) providing shelter for 1718 evacuees and 474 pets. Figure 1 demonstrates what percentage of staff required for each site that each partner agency was able to provide. Figure 2 shows a year-to-year comparison of each participating agency and their staffing capability. There is some artificiality to the exercise as some partner agencies did not participate fully in the exercise. During real activation, VDSS expects all partner agencies to contribute staffing support.

If an agency cannot provide adequate staffing to meet the population's need, VDEM has identified contractors that can fill in the gap. This secondary capability provides valuable surge staffing options, but it comes with a greater cost, increased variability in quality of personnel, and delayed activation time. Each partner agency should continue to bolster their internal staffing capabilities so as not to become fully dependent on private contractors.

Figure 1: Percentage of Required Staff Rostered Per Site

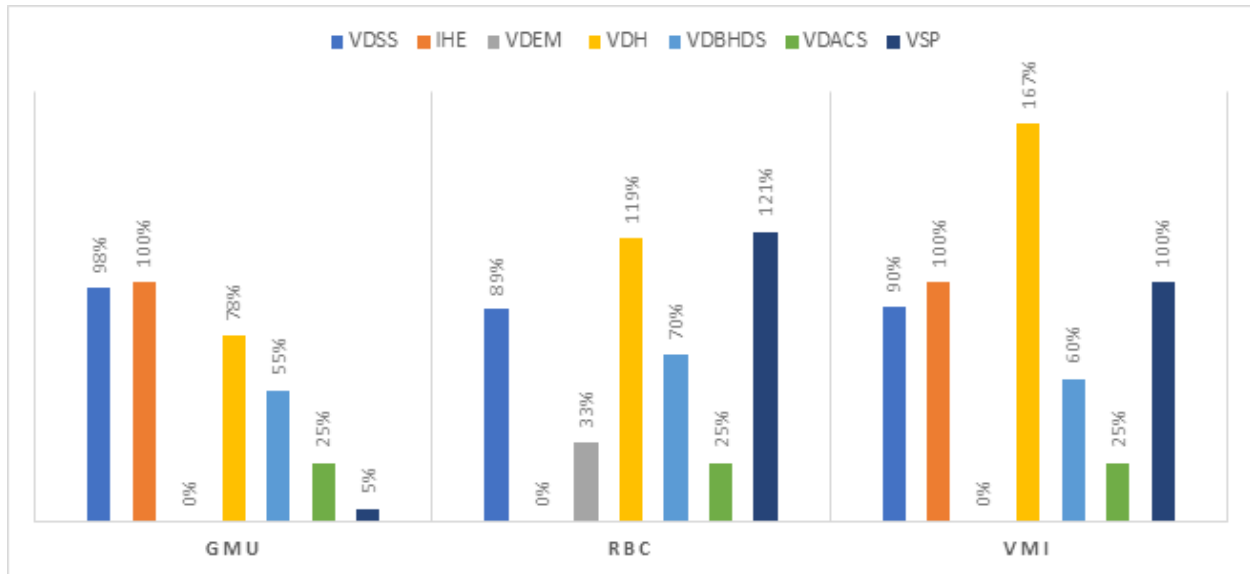
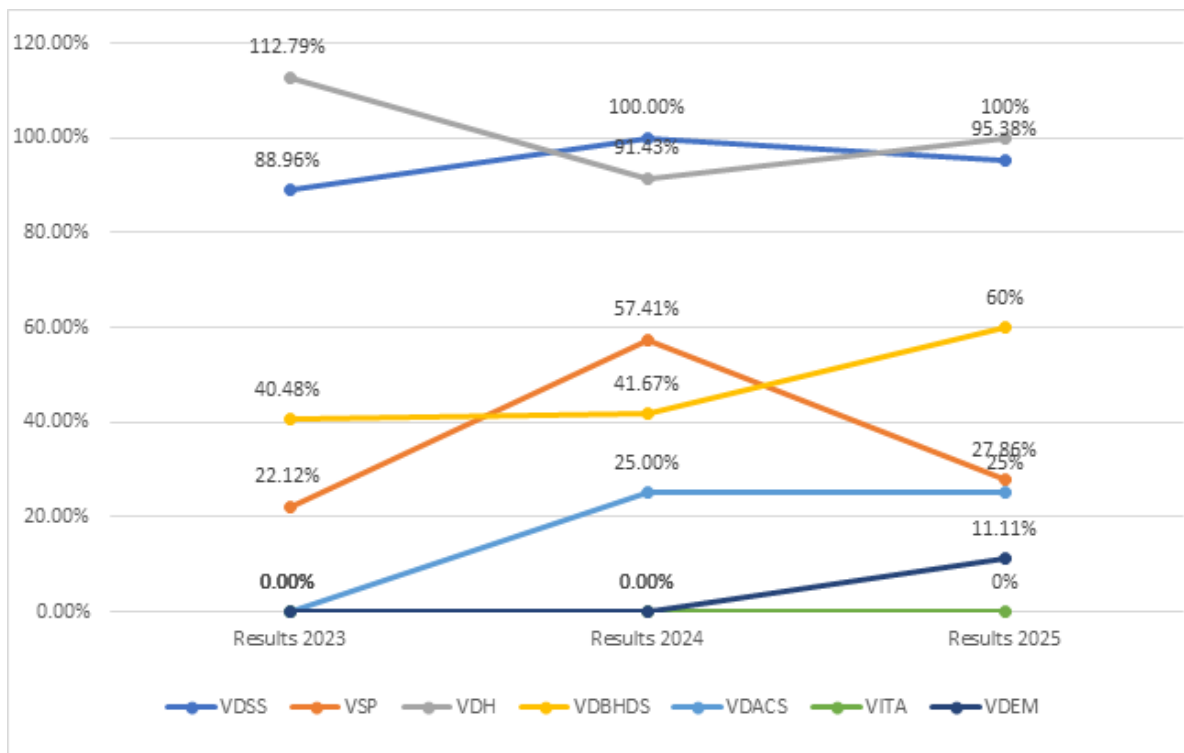


Figure 2 Year to Year Comparison of VAREX Results by Percent of Required Staff Rostered (2023-2025)



Shelters are staffed for 12-hour shifts, 24 hours a day. Therefore, to understand the full staffing requirement of shelter operations, Table 2 demonstrates the total number of different people needed for 2 shifts at each shelter site.

Table 2: Current Staffing Requirements for a 24 hour period

Site Name	Total DSS Staff Needed	Total Staff Needed, All Partner Agencies
Christopher Newport University	56	202
George Mason University	86	281
James Madison University	34	155
Longwood University	38	101
Paul D. Camp Community College	22	94
Patrick Henry Community College	20	98
Richard Bland College	24	127
University of Virginia	30	116
Virginia Commonwealth University	46	175
Virginia Military Institute	20	96
Virginia State University	26	113
Virginia Tech	60	185
College of William and Mary	36	172
Totals	498	1,915

PLAN UPDATE

All aspects of the SMS plan were updated in 2024, and all signatories signed the update by June 2025. The SMS plan is on a four-year maintenance schedule and will be due for another major update in 2028.

Site Specific Addendums to the SMS plan are updated biennially. The addendums are due for updates in 2026. Virginia Tech completed renovations to the War Memorial Hall in fall 2024, which was reassessed as a viable shelter facility and added to their Site-Specific Addendum.

EMERGENCY WORKFORCE AND ADJUNCT EMERGENCY WORKFORCE

The Emergency Workforce (EW) is made up of VDSS personnel who volunteer for disaster deployment in mass care operations and is bolstered by VDEM's Adjunct Emergency Workforce (AEW). The workforce demonstrates dedication to the program by participating in training, exercises, and team building events. The training and exercise program for shelter staff continues to grow more robust as additional exercises are incorporated into the training cycle every year.

VDSS continues to expand the Emergency Workforce (EW) and supplement staffing capabilities with the Adjunct Emergency Workforce (AEW). The AEW is a VDEM program to recruit employees from any state agency to volunteer for a disaster response role. AEW members are able to accept any role that is also available to the EW.

Between the AEW and the EW, there are currently 284 staff signed up for the Shelter Specialist program. Of those 284 people, 114 have completed their training and are deployable, and 170 could be deployed with "just-in-time" training. Thirty eight of the 114 fully deployable members are trained as part of the Shelter Management Team.

In the last year, VDEM created an online database to manage EW/AEW information such as contact information, volunteer role, training status, and activation rostering. The product is named “Commonwealth Coordination Rostering Portal.” The database is currently active and in use for the 2025 hurricane season. This was recommended in the previous report and is expected to improve volunteer management and rostering coordination.

TRAINING AND EXERCISES

VDSS is constantly preparing staff to support SMS operations and fulfill their roles in the shelter. VDSS training prepares staff for deployment by providing them with the knowledge and tools needed for success. Proactively identifying and developing material to support training needs is important not only to prepare staff, but also to build morale and team camaraderie in advance of 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. VDSS continues to maintain a schedule of mostly virtual training sessions because they provide greater flexibility and range in access for EW members.

There are three existing courses required in basic training. They are:

- VDSS-OEM 1101: State Managed Shelter (SMS) Plan Overview
- VDSS-OEM 1103: State Managed Shelter (SMS) Specialist Role Training
- VDSS-OEM 1010: Statewide Alert Network (SWAN) Overview and How-To Guide

Optional courses and ongoing training opportunities include:

- **VDSS - OEM1001: Assisting Individuals with Access and Functional Needs in Mass Care Settings**, which provides a basic overview of supporting individuals with AFN in shelters and other mass care activities
- **VDSS - OEM1003: Psychological First Aid**, which outlines basic self-care activities for survivors of and staff responding to an emergency event
- **VDSS - OEM1004: Handheld Radio Tutorial**, which teaches people how to operate a handheld radio
- **VDSS - OEM1005: Trauma Informed Care in Mass Care Settings**, which focuses on a methodical approach to address stressful situations and interactions using empathy and compassion
- **VDSS - OEM1006: Deployment Adminis-trivia**, a new offering this year, which explains administrative and logistics details for a response deployment
- **VDSS - OEM1104: Shelter Management Team Orientation**, which trains interested and qualified shelter specialists to be shift supervisors
- **VDSS - OEM1106: Shelter Manager and Shelter Manager's Assistant Orientation**, a new offering this year, which trains interested and qualified shift supervisors to be Shelter Managers and Shelter Manager's Assistants

Of the 114 members of the workforce who have completed all required training, 40 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:

- The Go Bag 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
- The annual Virtual Activation and Roster Exercise (VAREX) 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 availability in real time.
- The Shelter Management Team meets every other month for one hour to discuss policy changes, participate in mini drills related to their roles, and become more familiar with each other. These meetings are voluntary but well attended. Participants regularly display an eager willingness to maintain a greater level of preparedness. This is crucial to building confidence in providing effective sheltering.
- A full-scale shelter operations exercise was conducted at Longwood University in June 2025. More than 100 people from six state agencies, Longwood University, Centra Health, local EMS, the Free Foundation and Institute of Higher Education partners from JMU, P&HCC, VCU, and VT participated in the exercise either as a shelter staff member or as exercise support staff. Members of the community also supported the exercise by volunteering to act as evacuees seeking shelter. Feedback from this exercise will be incorporated into Standard Operating Procedure (SOPs), training, and the next update of the SMS plan.

A robust training program complete with drills, exercises, and improvement planning are critical to enhancing the capabilities required to shelter people in the Commonwealth during a catastrophic disaster.

SECTION 2 INITIATIVES BEYOND THE SMS PLAN

VDSS continues to make the following collaborative recommendations for the SMS program to improve the Commonwealth’s Shelter Capabilities and Readiness:

- Create a list of potential “just-in-time” shelter sites and complete programmatic assessments of each potential site.
- Continue the work from the Shelter Strategy Framework Project by creating prioritized implementation plans for identified solutions.
- Identify, fund, and implement a universal state and local electronic shelter registration software program.

ALTERNATE “JUST-IN-TIME” SITES

The development of additional and alternative shelter sites should be 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.

Efforts to collaborate with partner agencies, including VDEM and DGS, to try to identify additional and alternative solutions have been delayed. Personnel changes and large-scale incidents in Fall 2024 and Winter 2025 have hindered progress to identify and assess “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.

COMMONWEALTH SHELTER STRATEGY PROJECT

VDEM contracted a Shelter Project Coordinator in March 2022 for a two-year project to develop a shelter strategy for the commonwealth. The sheltering strategy framework was completed in May 2024 and is the first step to long-term sheltering stability in Virginia.

VDSS worked 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 propose actionable solutions to minimize sheltering gaps. Representatives from 17 different localities, 4 nonprofits, 7 state agencies, and FEMA contributed to the shelter strategy framework.

The main solutions identified in the project were as follows:

- Strengthen local shelter staffing capabilities by creating standardized training and job aids
- Improve accessibility of existing shelters or replacing inaccessible shelters with newer facilities that meet ADA requirements
- Identify an interoperable registration system
- Develop a tiered structure for sheltering to meet the needs of sheltering beyond a single locality through multi-jurisdictional sheltering
- Support preparedness efforts through plan and exercise templates and guidance from the Commonwealth

Since finalizing the document, no work has been done to advance the project to the implementation phase. It will be crucial to continue the work started with the strategy framework so that solutions are utilized effectively throughout Virginia.

UNIVERSAL ELECTRONIC SHELTER REGISTRATION SOFTWARE

A universal state and local electronic shelter registration software was recommended in this annual report in 2022, 2023, 2024 and continues to be recommended as a key solution to improving sheltering capabilities in the Commonwealth. Having an electronic registration tool that is interoperable between various parties responsible for sheltering would streamline the entire process, allowing for better sheltering operations throughout the Commonwealth. Unfortunately, without a funding source, this solution cannot be brought to fruition. Currently, the efforts to find a universal registration program are stalled.

VDSS has created an electronic registration system known as the Evacuee Accountability & Coordination System (EVACS). This system can be used by state employees because it was built through Power Apps in Microsoft Power Platform. While this system can be used in state shelters, it is not operable by localities.

CONCLUSION

In summary, while VDSS OEM continues to maintain and improve the State Managed Shelter program, the following collaborative recommendations will exponentially improve the Commonwealth's overall shelter capabilities and readiness:

- Create a list of potential “just-in-time” local and SMS sites and complete programmatic assessments of each potential site.
- Continue to develop the Emergency Workforce (EW) and Adjunct Emergency Workforce (AEW) with motivated recruitment and prepare them through comprehensive training courses and exercises.
- Continue the work from the Shelter Strategy Framework Project by creating prioritized implementation plans for identified solutions.
- Identify, fund, and implement a universal state and local electronic shelter registration software program.