

Housing People who are Homeless with Mental Illness Add \$20 Million to DBHDD Georgia Housing Voucher Program

Support homeless Georgians with severe and persistent mental illness and honor the state's obligations under the *Olmstead* Settlement Agreement with the federal Department of Justice. Georgia must fund the Georgia Housing Voucher Program at the level it requires. This cost effective program reduces homelessness, supports mental health recovery and community integration, benefiting individuals in need and the broader society.

The Georgia Housing Voucher Program Ends Homelessness

The Georgia Housing Voucher Program (GHVP) is a state-funded supportive housing program for chronically homeless people who have a severe and persistent mental illness. It uses a proven best practice and cost-effective strategy providing housing vouchers and wrap around services to help get and keep people safely housed. The GHVP directly reduces the number of people who are suffering on our streets and utilizing high-cost emergency and jail services.

The GHVP was created to meet the state's obligation under the Settlement Agreement entered into over 15 years ago with the federal Department of Justice. The state's obligation is to have the capacity to provide supportive housing and wrap-around services **to 9,000 people with severe and persistent mental illness who are cycling through the criminal justice system, state hospitals, and emergency rooms.** The state currently serves 2,200 people and **has not yet met its obligations under this portion of the settlement agreement.**

To meet the state's responsibility, the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) created the Office of Supportive Housing in 2019, which oversees the GHVP. GHVP provides: 1) a tenant-based housing voucher, 2) bridge funding to cover some of the one-time costs of transitioning to permanent housing, and 3) on-going supportive services. Providing housing stability accompanied by services – such as case management, wellness visits, behavioral health, and addiction recovery – provides a foundation for long-term improvement and greater independence.

GHVP Operates in Partnership with Private and Nonprofit Providers

The GHVP stops the cycle of homelessness by paying the portion of rent that the individual does not have the income to pay (voucher); connecting the person to a landlord that will accept the voucher; helping the person get set up in the apartment; and contracting with a nonprofit provider to provide ongoing wraparound services. Although this is a public program, it relies on partnerships with private and nonprofit providers.

GHVP is a Highly Effective and Nationally Recognized Program

GHVP is acknowledged nationally for its effectiveness. Other states have requested technical assistance from Georgia on this housing program for their state mental health authorities. The GHVP was recognized by the Council of State Governments. It was profiled by the National Conference of State Legislators at a national convening on behavioral health/homelessness in Colorado. The Florida Supportive Housing Coalition welcomed a presentation about GHVP at their annual conference, as did the Pathways Housing First Institute for their conferences in both Seattle and Atlanta. The Corporation for Supportive Housing recognized the housing support services of GHVP as a Medicaid innovation.

Increased Housing Costs and Need Necessitate Increased GHVP Funding

GHVP is seeing significant increases in demand and costs for services. The volume of assessments, referrals, and vouchers issued nearly doubled from 2022 to 2023. At the same time, the cost of delivering housing has also risen dramatically in recent years:

- In just the first 7 months of FY24, the program saw a 23% **growth in the number of households being served**, rising rapidly from 2,067 households in July 2023 to 2,549 in January 2024, far outpacing the growth seen during the previous years.
- The **cost of the average monthly rent subsidy to the program has nearly doubled, rising 74%** from \$652 in Jan. 2021 to \$1,133 per month in September 2024.
- Critical housing support services are attached to vouchers to help individuals secure an apartment and help keep them stably housed. **The costs of these support services have declined with the benefits of scale** from \$4,937 from 2023 to \$3,357 in 2024.
- Georgia is experiencing **increased homelessness** evidenced by a 29% increase in people who were homeless in the Point In Time count from 2018 to 2024.
- GHVP is **increasing the transition of eligible people to the federally funded Housing Choice Vouchers**, but not all can be served there, and the transition is slow.

GHVP is More Cost Effective Than Housing in Prisons, Jails, or Hospitals

Economically, we are making a mistake in not adequately funding this program. The program is highly effective in providing stable housing that ends homelessness. It is more costly to admit people repeatedly into prisons, jails, emergency rooms and hospitals as a substitute for housing.

Cost to House Individuals Experiencing Homelessness Per Day

Georgia Housing Voucher Program (voucher and supports)	\$48
Incarceration (metro county jail or state prison)	\$62-84
Emergency homeless shelter with services	\$75
Inpatient psychiatric bed (hospital)	\$770-820

Funding Increase of \$20 Million Needed for GHVP in the FY25A and FY26 Budgets

Despite the effectiveness of GHVP, funding was cut 24% at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and has not been fully restored. At the same time, housing costs have escalated, and the size of the target population has increased as homelessness has grown. Due to rising rents in the housing market, it costs more per person now to operate the program.

The GHVP's base budget is currently \$25.9 Million. An increase of \$20 million is urgently to support Georgians with severe and persistent mental illness and meet the state's legal obligation in the federal Settlement Agreement, Georgia must fund the GHVP at the level it requires. The GHVP reduces homelessness, supports mental health recovery, is cost effective, and supports employment opportunities, education, and integration into the community, benefiting not just individuals, but also the broader society.

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Community Friendship * Atlanta Neighborhood Development Partnership * Partners for Home
9to5 Georgia * Corporation for Supportive Housing * Grady Health System * PCCI * and others**

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