

Beyond the Lease: Preserving Housing, Strengthening Community

At COTS, the work of ending homelessness does not stop when someone signs a lease and receives a set of keys. In many ways, that moment is just the beginning.

For households who have experienced homelessness, the transition into permanent housing can bring relief, stability, and new challenges. COTS Housing Retention Services exist to ensure that formerly unhoused residents not only have access to housing, but are able to keep it. Through steady presence, practical support, and authentic relationship-building, our Housing Retention Team works alongside residents to preserve housing and strengthen long-term stability.

COTS currently operates 116 units of permanent and transitional housing across multiple sites, including Main Street Family Housing, 95 North Avenue, Smith House, St. John's Hall, and The Wilson in Burlington, as well as Canal Street in Winooksi. Every resident in these buildings has exited homelessness.

Our Housing Retention Team, comprised of a Housing Retention Coordinator and two Housing Retention Specialists, serves these households with a simple but powerful goal: prevent a return to homelessness.

Retention services include:

- Identifying immediate and short-term needs
- Developing individualized service plans
- Supporting household budgeting and financial wellness
- Facilitating positive landlord relationships
- Advocating with community partners
- Coaching life skills and goal-setting
- Opportunities for community connection

Not every barrier can be resolved during the housing search process. Mental health challenges, income instability, medical needs, substance use recovery, social isolation, and the lingering impacts of trauma do not disappear overnight. Our team acts as a bridge, offering continuous, patient, and trauma-informed care, long after move-in day.

Sometimes housing preservation hinges on something as simple as a pair of glasses.

One resident shared that he had gone without eyeglasses for three years. Though he had an updated prescription, the out-of-pocket cost kept him from filling it. The constant eyestrain affected his daily functioning and, ultimately, his readiness to address his substance use recovery.

With his permission, our Housing Retention Coordinator contacted a local optical shop that had previously offered community support. The shop provided glasses free of charge. The resident was fitted, chose frames he liked, and soon had clear vision again.

The result was more than improved eyesight. Relief from chronic discomfort restored focus and momentum, key elements in maintaining both recovery and housing stability.

In another case, a resident missed the recertification deadline for her housing subsidy and accrued significant rental arrears after losing assistance through the Vermont State Housing Authority. Without intervention, eviction was likely on the horizon.

Our team advocated for a reasonable accommodation related to her mental health needs. After the team's continued diligence and a formal hearing, her voucher was reinstated, back rent was paid, and her tenancy preserved. The outcome secured not just her housing, but her dignity, and reinforced the stabilizing power of supportive relationships.

Retention also means adapting housing to meet changing needs. When an aging resident with mobility challenges could no longer safely access his upper-floor apartment, our team prioritized his transfer into a first-floor unit as soon as one became available. This move did not displace someone experiencing homelessness, but ensured that this resident

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One of the permanently affordable apartments at COTS's Canal Street building in Winooksi for households who have experienced homelessness.

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could remain safely housed while opening his previous unit to someone in need. Housing stability, in this case, meant preventing a potential future crisis.

One of the most important lessons our Housing Retention Coordinator, Colleen Dykstra, has learned is that in many cases, support must be offered long before it is accepted.

In the early days of our retention program, engagement was modest. More often than not, residents' doors remained closed. Only through weekly office hours, regular building visits, and consistent outreach, did relationships begin to form, and doors being to crack open. Over time, these early threads of connection became a strong weave and a sturdy bridge. Today, engagement is strong, and residents increasingly view the retention team as a reliable and caring presence in their lives.

This consistency reflects a trauma-informed "challenge by choice" philosophy. Residents are encouraged to pursue goals at their own pace, with agency and self-direction. Whether that means connecting to visiting nurses to support aging in place, exploring educational opportunities, addressing financial repair, or joining a community-based activity, the path forward is collaborative.

Importantly, retention begins at move-in. A member of the team now attends lease signings whenever possible, offering face-to-face introductions and clear contact information. Within weeks of move-in, new residents are invited to participate in a client-centered goal-setting conversation, creating a roadmap that can be revisited throughout their tenancy. In the past year, 75% of new residents engaged in this process, laying groundwork for measurable progress and accountability.

We have observed that when individuals move from survival mode into stable housing, some respond with social withdrawal. After prolonged instability, isolation can feel protective. Yet isolation is also a known risk factor for relapse in substance use and mental health recovery, and can contribute to behaviors that jeopardize housing. That is why our retention work, which extends beyond crisis intervention, is so important. It makes space to cultivate community.

These gatherings, outings, and referrals are not peripheral, they are preventative. Each positive connection reduces isolation, builds resilience, and reinforces the habits that sustain housing.

As COTS expands its permanent affordable housing portfolio and prepares for significant developments, including the recent addition of Main Street Family Housing and the upcoming redevelopment of the former Waystation space, we recognize that retention services must grow alongside it.

The goal of the COTS Housing Retention team is to create the conditions for success for all current and future residents. That means investing not only in buildings, but in people.

Thanks to the interest and commitment of an anonymous family foundation, KeyBank, M&T Bank, Northfield Savings Bank, and other generous private donors, COTS is upholding and strengthening this vital work. We are actively pursuing additional multi-year resources to keep this work going.

Housing retention is, at its core, prevention. It is the steadfast, often unseen work, that preserves housing for our neighbors who have already endured the trauma of homelessness. It is the bridge between shelter and true stability, and it is one of the most powerful tools we have to ensure that once someone comes home, they can stay home.

In the past year:

80% of tenants had contact with the Housing Retention Team

50-60% actively connected with the team

50% attended in-house activities

30% participated in community-based activities

70% utilized community partner services

Through our community enrichment efforts, engagement has grown even stronger:

- 125 in-house activities offered
- 65% resident participation in in-house programming
- 100% follow-through for accompanied community-based appointments

A New Chapter at Main Street Family Housing

This winter, Main Street Family Housing was filled with laughter, stories, and the turning of pages as we honored the dedication of the new **Marjorie Lipson Reading Nook**, a cozy, welcoming space designed to nurture imagination and connection.

Marjorie Lipson has devoted her life to improving children's literacy. As Marge says, "Books and words help us understand the world and teach us that anything is possible."

With generous support from the Children's Literacy Foundation, COTS received a grant to stock the library with new books and to provide free books for every child who attended the celebration. Families also enjoyed sharing a complimentary meal and storytime with a professional storyteller who read in multiple languages, ensuring that every child could hear stories in a way that felt familiar and inclusive.

Children from Main Street Family Housing, both family shelters, and Family Supportive Housing were invited to take part in the festivities. The result was more than a commemoration, it was a moment of belonging.

Spaces like the Marjorie Lipson Reading Nook are an extension of housing retention work. Literacy supports educational success. Shared meals strengthen relationships. Multilingual storytelling honors the diverse identities within our community. Together, these experiences help create a culture of connection that supports children and parents alike in building stability and thriving lives.

Stable housing is not only about walls and a roof, it is about creating a place where families can grow, learn, and feel at home.



COTS grant writer and Housing Retention Team at literacy event for COTS families.



Recovery and Housing: A Partnership for Lasting Stability

At COTS, our mission is clear: to end homelessness by providing safe shelter, stable housing, and the support people need to move forward. Housing is foundational. It is the platform from which health can improve, employment can begin, families can reunite, and hope can take root.

And yet, we know that housing alone is not always enough.

Many of the individuals and families we serve face complex barriers on their path to stability. Substance use disorder is one of the most significant. Recovery is not linear. It requires community, accountability, compassion, and access to consistent support. Without these elements, even safe housing can feel fragile. That understanding has led to an innovative new partnership between COTS and the Turning Point Center of Chittenden County.

Through this partnership, Turning Point is now providing onsite recovery services within COTS adult shelter programs. These services include:

- Recovery coaching
- Onsite group meetings
- One-on-one peer support
- Training and education around substance use disorder and recovery

By embedding recovery resources directly into our spaces, we reduce barriers that

often prevent people from engaging in care. Transportation challenges, stigma, anxiety about unfamiliar settings, and competing survival priorities can all make it difficult to seek support off-site. When recovery services are offered where people already live or receive shelter, participation becomes more accessible and more sustainable. This model reflects a shared belief: recovery thrives in community.

"Sam," a Daystation guest who has struggled with substance use disorder for years, connected with the on-site Turning Point staff member during lunch one afternoon. At first, he was hesitant. Conversations about treatment had come and gone before and trust takes time to build.

Through continual engagement and encouragement, he ultimately agreed to pursue treatment. Turning Point and COTS staff worked together to secure a treatment bed and arranged transportation. But on the day he was supposed to leave, Sam did not show up.

It would have been easy to let the opportunity pass.

Instead, the Daystation coordinator went out into the community, located Sam, and once again encouraged him to take the step toward treatment. This time, he agreed.

This is what partnership makes possible: persistence without judgment, accountability grounded in care, and a shared commitment to someone's well-being. When Sam completes treatment, a bed will be waiting for him at the Waystation, providing one more layer of stability as he continues his recovery journey.

Housing and recovery, working together.

In the first phase of this partnership, we are already seeing meaningful results.

Participants have strengthened connections to higher levels of treatment, including Serenity House and Valley Vista. Recovery coaches have helped individuals navigate intake processes, coordinate next steps, and remain engaged while awaiting placement.

Access to health coverage has also been a critical focus. Through hands-on assistance, participants have successfully activated Medicaid, re-instated lapsed coverage, and resolved administrative barriers that might otherwise interrupt care. With insurance in place, individuals are better positioned to access detox, residential treatment, medication-assisted treatment, primary care, and behavioral health services.

Equally important, participants have:

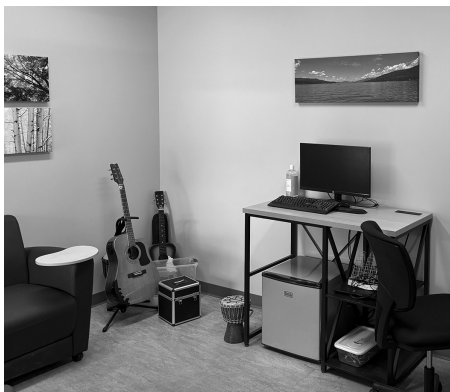
- Maintained shelter while pursuing recovery
- Strengthened their recovery through consistent peer support
- Built ongoing relationships with recovery coaches
- Connected to broader community resources that support long-term stability

These outcomes reinforce what we know: when recovery support is accessible and coordinated, people are better able to remain housed, engaged, and hopeful.

COTS is a housing-focused organization. Our staff are skilled in shelter operations, housing navigation, landlord engagement, and retention services. We understand how to stabilize someone in crisis and help them secure permanent housing.



At the newly renovated Waystation, a private room for recovery meetings welcomes guests.



Turning Point brings deep expertise in recovery support. Their peer-led model centers lived experience, mutual aid, and the belief that long-term recovery is possible for everyone. By partnering with specialists in substance use disorder recovery, we ensure that guests and residents receive high-quality, focused care from those best equipped to provide it.

Together, we are creating a more holistic system of support: one that addresses both the immediate need for housing and the underlying challenges that can threaten stability.

This partnership is made possible through generous support from the Pomerleau Family Foundation and the State of Vermont's opioid settlement funds. These investments recognize what we see every day: addressing substance use disorder is essential to preventing and ending homelessness.

At COTS, we remain focused on our core mission: ensuring that everyone has a safe place to call home. But we also recognize that stability requires more than shelter. It requires partnerships, expertise, and a willingness to address the full spectrum of barriers our guests face.

By working alongside Turning Point, we are expanding what housing support can look like. We are creating spaces where recovery conversations are normalized, where peer support is readily available, and where individuals can build the resilience needed to sustain both sobriety and housing.

**Housing is the foundation.
Recovery builds the structure.
Community holds it together.
Together, we are strengthening
all three.**

It Takes a Village

SEASON OF GIVING

Because of your support, we were able to provide every Daystation guest with boots this winter season. Thank you for helping keep our community members warm and safe throughout the cold months. Thank you, **Ann Joppe-Mercure, Ann Marie Bonanno, Anne Crowley and Alan Lampson, Carolyn Shapiro and Matthew Roy, Cathedral Church of St. Paul, Colleen Murphy, Cyndy McGeoch, David and Jane Allen, David and Michelle Rath, Dee Hodson, Edmund Izzo and Jill Boardman, Elizabeth Clayton, Elizabeth Nixon, Emily and Greg Abrami, Emily Greenstein, Glenn and Ronalyn Cummings, Halle Sobel and Mark Kautzman, Jack and Rosemarie Conn, James and Kathy Murray, James McHugh, Jennifer Moore, Joanne Haines, Judith Kitchell, Lee Nelson, Lee W. McLendon, Leigh Steele and Joannie Wales, Leslie Bouchard, Lily and Wilson Ezequelle, Luanne and Jeffrey Firlik, Lucie Lehmann, Luke, Mary Furtado, Mary Sapienza, Meg Berlin, Michelle Williamson, Naomi King, Nathan Gidding, Patricia MacCubbin and Ernest Prentice, Paulette and Steve Rocheleau, Rachel Guy, Rebecca and Larry Desrocher, Stephanie Perrotte, Susamma Mathew, Susan and Dale Whitney, Susan Geise, Susan Littlefield, Tom Lacy, William and Lisa Northup;** for donating adult winter boots.

In response to the SNAP/ThreeSquares benefit halt affecting Vermont families, COTS invited the community to donate grocery store gift cards for clients. These contributions provided immediate support helping our neighbors in need during a challenging time. Thank you for donating gift cards, **Casey Therrien and Matt Wolff, Cheryl Corsetti, D. Scott Bacon, Dana and Jared LeBlanc, Daniel Dailey, Donna Waterman, Eliana Fox, Erica Donnis, Gina Stevensen, Golub Foundation, Katharine Tucker, Kirsten McKeown, Nannette Burnette, Patricia Bosley, Weaver-Masseau Family, and Zachary Manganello.**

Thank you, **Mirabelles Bakery**, for donating birthday cakes for children celebrating their birthdays while staying at Family Shelter.

A huge thank you to **The Farmhouse Group** for donating delicious holiday meals for our Daystation guests to enjoy in November and December.

City Market's 28th Annual Tree Sale for COTS was a festive December tradition, with hundreds of trees from Moffatt's Tree Farm in Craftsbury sold to community members celebrating the season. Thanks to the efforts of City Market volunteers and staff, the event raised an impressive \$17,455 in support of our services.



Montstream Studios provided stunning winterscapes for us to feature on our holiday cards, spreading seasonal cheer to our supporters.

A heartfelt thank you to the **Pomerleau Family and the City of Burlington** for welcoming our family shelter children to the festive **Pomerleau Family Holiday Party** providing them with joyful experiences.



Thank you to **Love and Blessings** for hosting their annual Daystation holiday party, treating our adult guests to wrapped gifts and a delicious prime rib meal.

Gotta Have Sole Foundation, thank you for providing children in family shelter with footwear.

Thanks to our generous community, *every child* served by COTS received holiday gifts! Many of you dropped off gifts and gift cards, ordered presents online, and organized donation drives to make the season brighter.

Thank you, **Audrey O'Neill, Bobbi Holzel, Carrie Rigoli, Colleen Perron, Delia Clark, Elizabeth Arthur, Emily Necrason, Grace Morgado, Hans and Kathryn Heikel, Ian Speers and Deanna Hartog, Joanne Haines, Joshua Prokopy, Kate and Konrad Kruesi, Laura Crain and Sandra Limoge, Laura Weinstein, Liz Dyer and Jason Kolesnik, Mother Child World Organization, Nancy and Lynn Pruitt, NDI, O'Briens Aveda Institute, Oh My Dog VT, Peg Eddy, Rayssa LaBerge, Ronald and Agnes Regan, St. John Vianney Church, Stacey Francese and William Flender, Terry Gonyeau, United Church of Colchester, UVM Larner College of Medicine, Vermont's Original, LLC; and many more** for donating toys, games, gift cards, and craft supplies for children in COTS shelter and services.

Green Mountain Chorus delivered Singing Valentines, with part of the proceeds benefiting COTS.

Brian's North End Automotive offered a discount to COTS employees again this year!

COTS EVENTS

Thank you for joining us at the COTS Candlelight Vigil. Together, we honored those who have died while experiencing homelessness and those currently without a home through heartfelt vignettes, beautiful performances by **Edmund's Elementary School Choir** lead by **Betsy Nolan**, and the lighting of candles. Thank you to **our wonderful longtime friends and supporters** for reading at this event. Thank you **Sugarsnap Catering** for donating delicious cookies, and **Starbucks** for gifting us hot cocoa.

We are so lucky to have such a wonderful community who helped us exceed our **COTS Phonathon** goal. Thank you for putting up yard signs, answering the call, spreading the word, and of course, donating to end homelessness in Vermont! **Thank you, COTS volunteers, staff, board members, and longtime partners** for making these calls. With your help, **we surpassed our goal of \$285,000**. Thank you, **Leonardo's Pizza**, for providing our callers with the perfect meal.



EastRise Credit Union provided a generous Challenge Grant for the Phonathon and joined us in an off-site calling party which resulted in thousands of dollars raised! **WOKO-FM** partnered with us on the radio to help share success stories and encourage listeners to call in their pledges.



DONATIONS, DRIVES, AND COTS WISH LIST

Thank you, **Fourtital Factory**, for donating 700 high quality beanies.

ReSOURCE donated many vouchers for our guests to shop.

Gadue's Dry Cleaning partnered with COTS to dry clean winter coats from multiple drives this winter. Special shout out to Penny!

Thank you, **Hanes for Good**, for providing hundreds of socks.

The New England Patriots donated life-saving Empowerment sleeping bag coats for our Daystation guests.

Thank you, **Bombas**, for your ongoing donations of warm, durable socks.

Zumiez Foundation, we are so grateful for your generous donation of clothing.

Ohavi Zedek Synagogue donated vouchers to Shalom Shuk for our clients again this year!

Donna Hayes donated 10 winter coats in memory of Sean Hayes.

Allen Brook School students used the proceeds from their Trailblazer Trinket Company craft fair to purchase items for our guests.

Special thanks to those who have donated from our wish list or have set up donation drives. Thank you, **Albert D. Lawton Intermediate School, Albert Echt, Arabella Hubbard, Ashley Speckman, Austin Cobb, Betty and Marvin Libson, Mary Knight, Bickford USA, Bobby, Brian's North End Automotive, Cathy Gibson, Chris Kochlewicz, Colleen Perron, Courtney Fleisher, Cynthia Sturtevant, D. Scott Bacon, Darn Tough Vermont, Deborah Mayville, Edward Jones Investments, Elijah Werth, Emilie Munson, Emily Bechard, Enreko Tyler, Essex Junction Grand Buffet, Eugenia Lamet, First Unitarian Universalist Society, Frank and Debbie Koss, Friend, Greek Ladies Philoptochos Society, Green Mountain Chapter DAR, Harbor Village, Ian Speers and Deanna Hartog, Jason Fitzgerald, Jenna LaRose, Jerry and Judy Flanagan, Jessica Hill, Joan Shannon and Ken Grillo, Jordan Young, Joy Danila, Katrina Woodworth, Kelsey Murphy, Ken Signorello, Kristen Hamilton, Lake Champlain Chocolates, Living Well Center for Integrative Health, Mari Walsh, Mark Nelson, Mark Vital, Michelle Force, Order of the Eastern Star, Pamela Whitten, Paul Reinhardt & Elizabeth Parsons-Reinhardt, Peter and Ellen Roberts, Residence at Shelburne**

Bay, Rob Gutman, Rotary Club of Essex, Shannon Phillips, St Michael's College Athletics, Susan and Dale Whitney, Susan Marius, SymQuest, True Path Wellness, Vermont Queer Legal Professionals; and so many more for donating necessary hygiene products, comfort items, gift cards, and other helpful items.

DAYSTATION LUNCH

Thank you, **Costco**, for supporting our Daystation lunch program with gift cards!

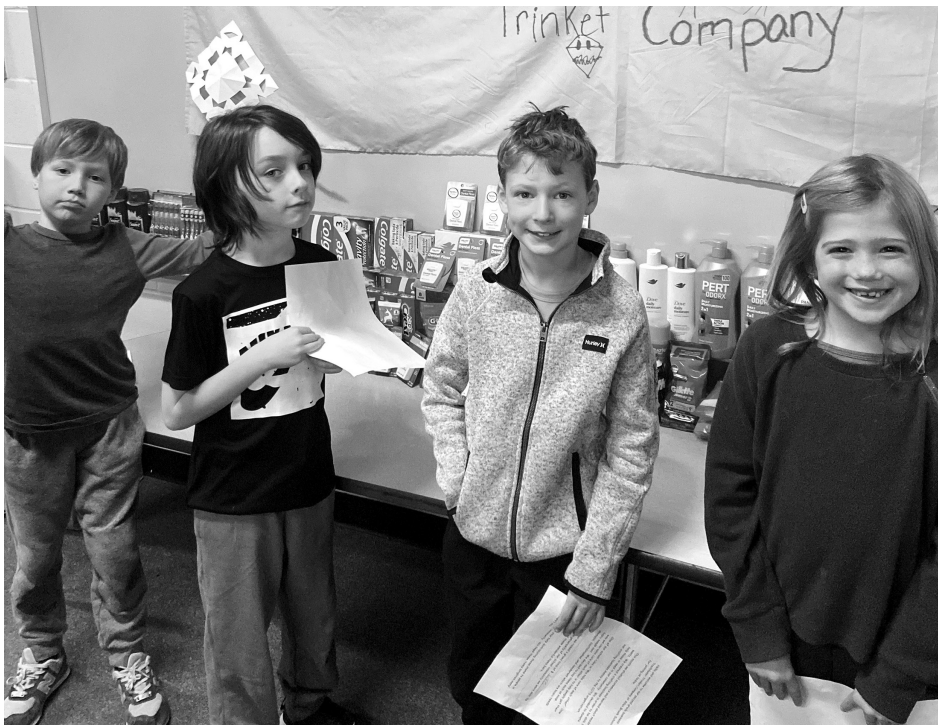
Coffee Quality Laboratory has made many donations of whole bean coffee. We appreciate you.

Elizabeth and Andrew Boutin, thanks for donating 8 dozen fresh eggs from Big Mountain Farm.

Keurig Dr Pepper thank you for supplying us with a donation of pies and coffee.

Shelburne Farms, we are grateful for the donuts donated to Family Shelter.

Thank you to these wonderful groups and individuals for donating food and meals to our Daystation drop-in shelter. It is no easy feat to feed 70-100 people, and we appreciate every single one of you. Thank you, **All Souls Interfaith Gathering, Audrey O'Neill, Barbara Fritsche, Brett Smith and Elisa Freeman, Cathedral Church of St. Paul, COTS Board, Department for Children and Families - Family Services Division, Emily and Greg Abrami, Essex Catholic Community, Evernorth, Hallam-ICS, Hana Behn, Healthy Living Market & Cafe, Herons Llyn Farm, Jersey Mike's, Jessica Chamberlain, Jude McIntosh, Katharine Tucker, Love & Blessings, Marie Anestopoulos, Michael and Cynthia Shanks, National Life Group, New King Church, Patricia and Mark Wehman, Pinewood Manor Homeowners Association, Rhino Foods, Richmond Congregational Church, Ruth and Anthony Julianelle, Saint Michael's College, Sarah Heim, Sarah Hoff, Sherpa Foods, LLC, Sugarsnap, Sydney Sifer, Taesha Butler, Tammy and Glenn Johnson, The Farmhouse Group, The Mountain Mamas, UVM Department of Student Life; and more.** Many of these people have donated lunches multiple times!



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Save the Date!

Sunday, May 3, 2026

The **COTS Walk** is back, and we invite you to lead the way!

This beloved annual event is more than a fundraiser. It's a powerful expression of what's possible when a community shows up for its neighbors. As a walker, your participation fuels shelter, housing, and support services that create lasting stability for Vermonters experiencing homelessness.

This year's theme, **Every Story Deserves a Home**, reminds us that behind every door is a person with hopes, challenges, and a future worth investing in. The 3.6-mile walk through Burlington passes COTS shelters and housing sites, offering a visible reminder that your generosity builds real doors, real keys, and real futures. Along the route, walkers will enjoy live music, community spirit, and end the route with plenty of Ben & Jerry's ice cream.

The COTS Walk is a love letter to Burlington and the community we share, a celebration of compassion, connection, and the belief that everyone deserves a safe place to call home. We hope you'll walk, give, and inspire others to join you.



Register today at www.cotsonline.org.