



Otsego County

Cost of Temporary Housing

Report of Examination

Period Covered:

January 1, 2013 – December 31, 2014

2015M-97



Thomas P. DiNapoli

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State of New York Office of the State Comptroller

Division of Local Government and School Accountability

January 2016

Dear County Officials:

A top priority of the Office of the State Comptroller is to help local government officials manage government resources efficiently and effectively and, by so doing, provide accountability for tax dollars spent to support government operations. The Comptroller oversees the fiscal affairs of local governments statewide, as well as compliance with relevant statutes and observance of good business practices. This fiscal oversight is accomplished, in part, through our audits, which identify opportunities for improving operations and County Board governance. Audits also can identify strategies to reduce costs and to strengthen controls intended to safeguard local government assets.

Following is a report of our audit of Otsego County, entitled Cost of Temporary Housing. This audit was conducted pursuant to Article V, Section 1 of the State Constitution and the State Comptroller's authority as set forth in Article 3 of the New York State General Municipal Law.

This audit's results and recommendations are resources for local government officials to use in effectively managing operations and in meeting the expectations of their constituents. If you have questions about this report, please feel free to contact the local regional office for your county, as listed at the end of this report.

Respectfully submitted,

*Office of the State Comptroller
Division of Local Government
and School Accountability*



State of New York Office of the State Comptroller

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The County of Otsego (County) is governed by the Board of Representatives (Board), which is composed of 14 elected members. The Board is responsible for the general management and control of the County's financial affairs. The Board Chair is the chief executive officer and is responsible, along with other administrative staff, for the day-to-day management of County operations. Budgeted appropriations for 2015 were approximately \$103 million. The Department of Social Services (DSS) is responsible for providing temporary housing for eligible individuals and families. An appointed Department head oversees the day-to-day management of DSS. In 2013 and 2014, the program cost of providing temporary housing totaled almost \$1.9 million and the program is currently housing approximately 40 to 50 individuals each week.

Scope and Objective

The objective of our audit was to review the County's administration of the temporary housing program from January 1, 2013 through December 31, 2014. We extended our scope back to 2012 for long-term cases and to 2001 for historical perspective on the total cost of providing temporary housing. We also extended our scope forward to April 20, 2015 to examine application processing times. Our audit addressed the following related question:

- Did County officials effectively manage the cost of temporary housing?

Audit Results

Even though County officials have been discussing the escalating costs of temporary housing for several years, prior to March 2014 they had not taken steps to effectively manage these costs. County officials house eligible individuals and families in motels and in the County's emergency housing facility (Shelter). Officials typically house individuals in motels for \$50 a night and families in the Shelter for \$75 a night per individual without a discount for families. Since 2001 the annual total temporary housing costs have increased, with a dramatic increase beginning in 2006. From 2006 through 2014, temporary housing costs in the County have increased by 400 percent from almost \$183,000 to over \$909,000. This increase is a result of the length of stay and cost per night. While the goal is to place clients in permanent housing as soon as possible, there are several external factors contributing to the difficulty in finding reasonably priced permanent housing within the County, such as the decline in the economy, two local colleges with students using off-campus housing and the increase in tourism due to the baseball camps in the Cooperstown and Oneonta areas.

In 2001, County officials paid for 645 nights of temporary housing costs for 60 cases, while in 2014, they paid for 17,731 nights for 291 cases. Additionally, the cost per night to house clients in the Shelter

is significantly more expensive than in the motels. The Shelter was used by the County for 15 percent of the total nights, or 7,316 nights, during 2012 through 2014, with 18 percent of these cases over 90 days. This illustrates how the temporary housing system became very costly, near-permanent housing for some.

Additionally, the County's temporary housing costs per capita and average cost per night are higher than in four neighboring counties (Chenango, Delaware, Schoharie and Sullivan). However, the major contributing factor to the County's higher cost is the number of nights paid for. The County pays for more nights than the four neighboring counties. For example, in 2014, the County paid for 17,731 nights, while Chenango County paid for 718 nights and Sullivan County paid for 11,098 nights.

The County has the potential to achieve significant savings for temporary housing assistance. We conducted a brief survey of the four neighboring counties and found that each collected, researched and analyzed data on providing temporary housing to develop various strategies within their programs to manage the costs while providing services to their homeless populations. The County, which has not taken on these activities, could benefit from conducting similar efforts. If County officials reduced the costs for providing temporary housing for their most expensive cases by using less expensive options to reduce the amount paid per night and number of nights stayed, they could have saved approximately \$1 million from 2012 through 2014. If County officials could bring the County's cost per capita in line with the costs of neighboring counties by adopting some of the strategies used in those locations, we estimate that the County's costs could be reduced by hundreds of thousands of dollars. For example, if the County's cost per capita of \$43 were the same as Sullivan County's cost per capita of \$39, the County would have saved approximately \$200,000 during the same three year period.

Comments of Local Officials

The results of our audit and recommendations have been discussed with County officials, and their comments, which appear in Appendix A, have been considered in preparing this report. County officials agreed with our recommendations and indicated they planned to take corrective action.

Introduction

Background

The County of Otsego (County) is located in central New York State and has approximately 62,000 residents. The County includes 24 towns and 9 villages and covers 1,002 square miles. The County is governed by the Board of Representatives (Board), which is composed of 14 elected members. The Board is responsible for the general management and control of the County's financial affairs. The Board Chair is the chief executive officer and is responsible, along with other administrative staff, for the day-to-day management of County operations. Budgeted appropriations for the 2015 fiscal year were approximately \$103 million for all funds, primarily funded with real property taxes, sales and use taxes and State and federal aid.

The County provides a variety of services to its residents, including public safety, maintenance of roads and parks, employment assistance, health care, mental health services, aging services and temporary assistance to individuals and families. The Department of Social Services (DSS) is responsible for providing temporary assistance for eligible individuals and families with social service and financial needs to assist them with leading safe, healthy and independent lives. One area of service is to provide temporary housing for eligible individuals and families. An appointed Department head¹ oversees the day-to-day management of DSS, including the temporary housing program. In 2013 and 2014, the program cost of providing temporary housing totaled almost \$1.9 million and DSS housing employees informed us they are currently housing approximately 40 to 50 individuals each week.

Objective

The objective of our audit was to review the County's administration of the temporary housing program. Our audit addressed the following related question:

- Did County officials effectively manage the cost of temporary housing?

Scope and Methodology

We examined the County's administration and oversight of the temporary housing program from January 1, 2013 through December 31, 2014. We extended our scope back to 2012 for long-term cases and to 2001 for historical perspective on the total cost of providing temporary housing. We also extended our scope forward to April 20, 2015 to examine application processing times.

¹ The current Commissioner of Social Services was appointed in September 2014.

We conducted our audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards (GAGAS). More information on such standards and the methodology used in performing this audit are included in Appendix B of this report. Unless otherwise indicated in this report, samples for testing were selected based on professional judgment, as it was not the intent to project the results onto the entire population. Where applicable, information is presented concerning the value and/or size of the relevant population and the sample selected for examination.

**Comments of
Local Officials and
Corrective Action**

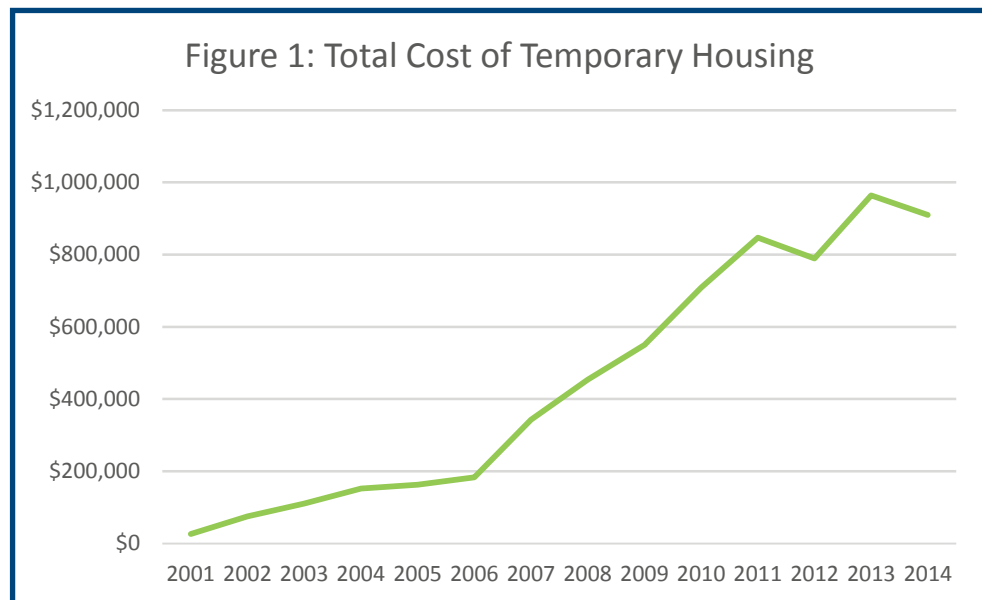
The results of our audit and recommendations have been discussed with County officials, and their comments, which appear in Appendix A, have been considered in preparing this report. County officials generally agreed with our recommendations and indicated they planned to initiate corrective action.

The Board has the responsibility to initiate corrective action. A written corrective action plan (CAP) that addresses the findings and recommendations in this report should be prepared and forwarded to our office within 90 days, pursuant to Section 35 of General Municipal Law. For more information on preparing and filing your CAP, please refer to our brochure, *Responding to an OSC Audit Report*, which you received with the draft audit report. We encourage the Board to make this plan available for public review in the Clerk of the Board's office.

Cost of Temporary Housing

The Board is responsible for providing temporary housing for persons and families in need of such assistance with a program administered by DSS. DSS is responsible for both verifying that those applying for services are eligible and identifying the type of facility and location in which they will be housed. Such provision may include payments for appropriate shelter or providing shelter in publicly-owned facilities. The overriding concern is to locate, secure and pay for housing that meets basic standards of health and safety.² Such housing may include family shelters, shelters for pregnant women, shelters for adults, hotels, motels or other temporary housing for which the County may negotiate a nightly rate. County officials should manage the overall cost to ensure sufficient and proper services are provided in the most economical manner. This can be achieved by continually monitoring the aggregate needs of the homeless, the local housing market and the total cost of the program.

Even though County officials have been discussing the escalating costs of temporary housing for several years, prior to March 2014 they had not taken steps to effectively manage these costs. The annual total temporary housing costs have increased since 2001, with a dramatic acceleration beginning in 2006. For example, from 2006 through 2014, the cost of temporary housing has increased by almost 400 percent, from nearly \$183,000 to more than \$909,000 (see Figure 1).



The County's costs per case is a function of the number of nights housing is provided and the cost per night for each housing option as shown in

² See Chapter 27, Section B, Temporary Housing Assistance (THA), at <https://otda.ny.gov/programs/temporary-assistance/TASB.pdf>

Figure 2. While the goal is to place clients in permanent housing as soon as possible, there are several external factors contributing to the difficulty in finding reasonably priced permanent housing within the County, such as the decline in the economy, two local colleges with students using off-campus housing and the increase in tourism due to the baseball camps in the Cooperstown and Oneonta areas.³ As a result, the County has a small number of cases that have not been placed in permanent housing and have required lengthy stays in temporary housing. The County has incurred disproportionately higher costs for these cases. Additionally, the cost per night to house clients in the emergency housing facility (Shelter), which provides some advantages for clients⁴ and is operated by a local non-profit corporation, is significantly more expensive than other options.

Figure 2: Motel and Shelter Nights and Cost ^a					
		2012	2013	2014	Totals
Motel	Total Nights	12,132	14,357	15,221	41,710
	Cost per Case Night	\$47	\$46	\$43	\$45
	Total Cost	\$569,448	\$656,535	\$658,448	\$1,884,431
Shelter	Total Nights	2,187	2,619	2,510	7,316
	Cost per Case Night ^b	\$101	\$118	\$100	\$106
	Total Cost	\$220,076	\$307,747	\$251,232	\$779,055
Grand Total Nights		14,319	16,976	17,731	49,026
Grand Total Cost		\$789,524	\$964,282	\$909,680	\$2,663,486
^a Total cost for both the motel and Shelter will not be divisible by the contracted price per night because of variables. For example, the portion of the cost that may be paid by an individual can vary and the rates per person at the motels can be discounted. ^b The cost per case night for the Shelter does not take into account the number of individuals. For example, if there is one case with two individuals staying one night and one case with one individual staying one night, this would calculate to a cost per case night of \$112.50; whereas, if there are three cases with one individual each staying one night, this would calculate to a cost per case night of \$75.					

County officials house eligible individuals and families in motels and the Shelter. Officials explained that they typically house individuals in motels for \$50 a night and families in the Shelter for \$75 a night per individual without a discount for families. The Shelter was used by the County for 15 percent of the total nights, or 7,316 nights, during 2012 through 2014. Officials also explained that families are housed in the Shelter because of safety concerns and because it provides a more supportive environment with a better chance of success in quickly finding safe, affordable permanent housing. Although we confirmed that the Shelter is safer and provides a more supportive environment than the motels,⁵ 18 percent of the cases housed in the Shelter from 2012

³ Many of the students that attend the colleges and the families that come for the baseball camps will rent housing, causing the price of permanent housing to increase due to the higher demand.

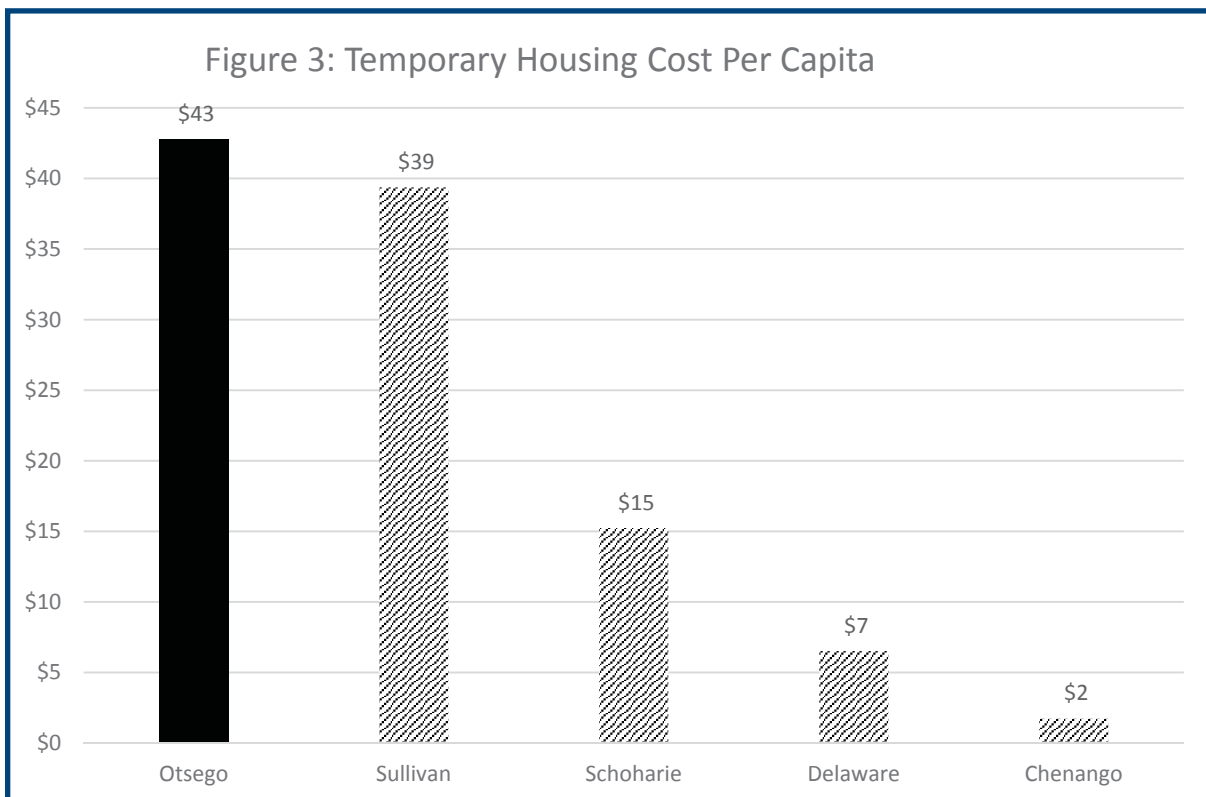
⁴ Advantages include food, supervision and other supportive services, including housing and job search assistance that the motels do not provide.

⁵ We went to the Shelter and observed there was a locked door with check-in required to be buzzed through. In addition, there were support personnel on-site, computers that could be used to find housing or jobs and bulletin boards with housing and job listings.

through 2014 stayed over 90 days. For example, one of the 10 cases in our sample stayed 188 nights. This has contributed to the County's increase in temporary housing costs.

In 2001, County officials paid for 645 nights⁶ of temporary housing for 60 cases, while in 2014 they paid for 17,731 nights for 291 cases. The cost in 2001 totaled approximately \$26,000 to house all cases in contrast to the cost in 2014 of \$24,300 to house one case (a family of six) for less than two months. This is equivalent to the annual cost of a \$400,000, 30-year mortgage at an interest rate of 4.5 percent. This family was housed at the Shelter⁷ at \$450 per night, which is more expensive than motels that can accommodate families at a discounted rate of about \$100 per night.

We compared the cost per capita of providing temporary housing in the County to the cost per capita⁸ in four neighboring counties (Sullivan, Schoharie, Delaware and Chenango).⁹ As shown in Figure 3, the other counties are providing temporary housing at a significantly lower cost.



⁶ The number of nights represents the nights stayed for each case and not the nights stayed for each individual who is part of the case.

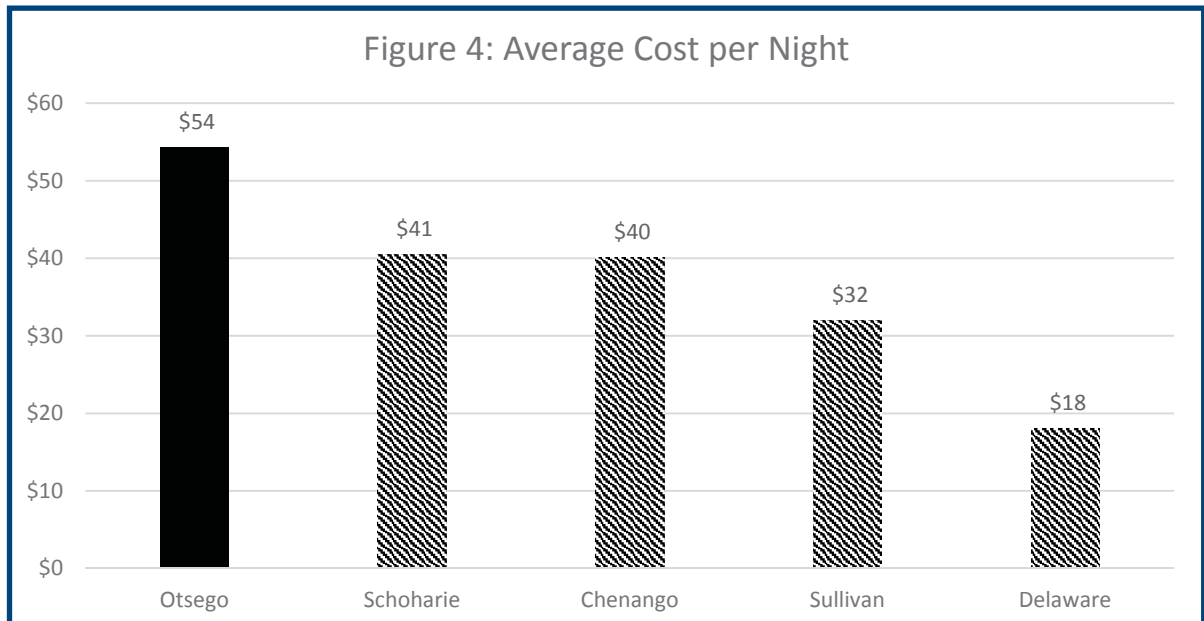
⁷ The County started contracting to use the Shelter in November 2003.

⁸ As reported to the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) for 2012 through 2014.

⁹ This does not include the costs of maintaining County-owned facilities in two of the counties.

Chenango County had a cost per capita that was just 4 percent of Otsego County's cost, while Sullivan County had a cost per capita that was 92 percent of Otsego County's cost.

The average cost per night is also higher in Otsego County, as shown in Figure 4. For example, Chenango County, which has the lowest cost per capita, has an average cost per night of \$40, 26 percent less than Otsego County, which has an average cost per night of \$54. While Sullivan County has the second highest cost per capita, it has an average cost per night of \$32, which is 41 percent less than Otsego County's cost per night of \$54.



However, while cost per night is high in the County, the major contributing factor to the overall higher cost is the number of nights paid for temporary housing. The County pays for more nights than the other counties. For example, in 2014 the County paid for 17,731 nights, while Chenango County paid for 718 nights and Sullivan County paid for 11,098 nights.

To determine the variation of cost among cases, we reviewed 646 housing cases in the County from 2012 through 2014 totaling almost \$2.7 million. We found that 63 cases (10 percent of cases, which cost more than \$10,000) accounted for 44 percent of the total temporary housing costs (\$1.2 million). On average the County paid \$18,735 for these cases over the period, compared to \$2,544 per case for the remaining 90 percent of cases. Within these high cost cases, the 10 most expensive included extensive use of the Shelter. However, these costs were driven primarily by the length of time housing assistance was provided. Two of the three most expensive cases extended over several years, indicating an inefficient use of transitional housing resources. This illustrates how the temporary housing system became very costly, near-permanent housing for some.

We conducted a brief survey of the four neighboring counties and found that all have collected, researched and analyzed data on providing temporary housing to develop various strategies within their programs to manage costs while providing services to their homeless populations. The County, which has not taken on these activities, could benefit from conducting similar efforts. County officials told us they have discussed the need to collect and analyze data on temporary housing; however, they have not yet done so.

County officials have implemented some new procedures to address the rising temporary housing cost. Based on concerns about possible fraud, in March 2014 the County began routine and unannounced inspections at the motels used to house homeless individuals to help ensure the recipients were following the minimum requirements and were actually using the motel rooms. County officials noted some exceptions and monthly reports indicated these inspections resulted in cost savings.

Additionally, to address concerns about the backlog of housing applications and long processing times, the Board authorized the hiring of a dedicated housing examiner in September 2014. During the application process, temporary housing benefits are paid; therefore, long processing times contribute to the high costs of temporary housing. Based on our testing of 40 applications processed before and 40 processed after the hiring of the dedicated housing examiner, there was a 29 percent decrease in average processing time. Other than these changes, County officials have been providing the same level of assistance through the same means and routines that have been used for nearly the past decade. In addition, based on discussions with Office of the State Comptroller auditors during the audit, the County hired a consultant in May 2015 to study and report on potential solutions to the challenges the County faces in providing cost-effective temporary housing.

The potential for savings in the County is significant. Although County DSS staff recognized that housing costs were increasing in total, little to no effort was expended to investigate the underlying causes and explore viable solutions. As a result, extended periods of providing temporary housing for individual cases have, in aggregate, become a primary driver of the increase in total temporary assistance costs.

To illustrate the potential for savings, we averaged the costs of all County temporary housing cases costing more than \$10,000 from 2012 through 2014 (the top 10 percent of the most expensive cases as discussed previously). If DSS could have reduced the average cost of these cases to the average cost of the remaining cases, or \$2,600,

the nearly \$2.7 million spent on temporary housing assistance for the three-year period could have been reduced by more than \$1 million (38 percent). We recognize that the entire estimated savings may not be attainable because a portion of the client population is more difficult to place in permanent housing, due to issues including chemical addictions, mental health issues and criminal records, and therefore, may require more supportive services.

In another illustration of the potential for savings, if the County could bring its cost per capita in line with the other counties identified previously by adopting some of their strategies, we estimate that the County's costs could be reduced by hundreds of thousands of dollars. For example, if the County's cost per capita of \$43 were the same as Sullivan County's cost per capita of \$39, the County would have saved approximately \$200,000 during the same three year period.

Recommendations

County officials should:

1. Develop criteria and establish goals for successful program performance and collect the relevant data necessary to monitor the program's performance against those goals.
2. Evaluate the use of the Shelter to determine if it is meeting their goals and expectations in a cost-efficient manner.
3. Reduce the cost of the most expensive cases by addressing the underlying needs of the recipients and find housing alternatives to meet those needs in a cost-effective manner.
4. Contact neighboring counties to identify critical differences in the strategies employed for temporary housing.

APPENDIX A

RESPONSE FROM LOCAL OFFICIALS

The local officials' response to this audit can be found on the following page.



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January 4, 2016

H. Todd Eames, Chief Examiner
Office of the State Comptroller
State Office Building – Suite 1702
44 Hawley Street
Binghamton, New York 13901-4417

Dear Mr. Eames:

Otsego County is in receipt of the Draft Otsego County Cost of Temporary Housing Report of Examination, Period Covered: January 1, 2013 – December 31, 2014 (2015M-97). The Board generally concurs with the Comptroller's findings and appreciates the recommendations included in the report.

The audit review process offered the county a professional, objective perspective on housing/homeless concerns and costs that have not gone unnoticed by county officials, and yet have continued to escalate. Discussions with the examiner were thoughtful and lead not only to helpful statistical data for consideration but also a validation of the complexity of managing the neediest homeless persons in the county. Light was shed upon the multifaceted nature of the problems by way of true consideration for the uniqueness of our county and the populations that we serve.

With increased prioritization and solution focused efforts we will endeavor to reverse the curve of increasing homelessness and the high costs that result. As discussed, we will be forwarding our Corrective Action Plan within the 90-day required timeframe.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Clark, Board Chair

APPENDIX B

AUDIT METHODOLOGY AND STANDARDS

Our overall goal was to assess the County's temporary housing program to determine if the Board effectively managed the cost of temporary housing for individuals and families. To accomplish the objective of this audit and obtain valid audit evidence, we performed procedures that included the following:

- We interviewed County and DSS officials and District Attorney's office employees and reviewed the special investigation unit's monthly reports, the human services committee minutes from 2013 and 2014 and the contract with the Shelter to determine the processes for managing and monitoring the County's temporary housing program.
- We interviewed Shelter employees and took a tour to verify the services and advantages provided to the residents of the Shelter.
- We reviewed a housing study on permanent housing in the County commissioned by the Board in 2009 to support verbal evidence provided by County officials that described the unique challenges they face in providing temporary housing.
- We obtained the cost of providing temporary housing from 2001 through 2014 from County employees and OTDA to analyze the trend of increasing costs. We used this data to calculate the number of nights and cases to determine how much these figures increased from 2001 through 2014.
- We used data provided by OTDA for 2012 through 2014 to compare the cost of providing temporary housing and the number of nights paid for in the County to four neighboring counties with similar populations located in the service area of the Office of the State Comptroller's Binghamton Regional Office.¹⁰ We calculated the potential savings from 2012 through 2014 if County officials could reduce their cost per capita to the same level as Sullivan County.
- We also used this data to calculate the cost per night in the County and compared it to the four neighboring counties to determine the extent to which this was a contributing factor to the total cost. We also calculated the number of nights the County was housing clients at the Shelter along with the length of time they were staying to determine what percentage stayed over 90 days in the Shelter.
- We calculated the total cost per night to house a family of six at the Shelter and compared it to how much it would cost to house that same family in a motel based on the County's rates.
- We used a mortgage loan calculator to calculate the annual cost of a \$400,000, 30 year mortgage at an interest rate of 4.5 percent and compared it to the cost to house a family of six for less than two months.

¹⁰ The Binghamton Region includes the following Counties: Broome, Chenango, Cortland, Delaware, Otsego, Schoharie, Sullivan, Tioga and Tompkins.

- We obtained data for all 646 cases from OTDA for 2012 through 2014 and selected 63 of the most expensive cases, or 10 percent, to determine what was contributing to the high cost of temporary housing at the County, such as long-term cases, types of housing, etc. We also used this data to determine the average cost per case of the 63 most expensive cases and the other 583 cases. We used these averages to calculate the potential cost savings the County could have recognized from 2012 through 2014 by reducing the average cost of those expensive cases to the average cost of the other 583 cases. Of the 63 most expensive cases, 31 of those cases utilized the Shelter. We selected 10 of those 31 cases to determine if they stayed longer than 90 days. We included clients that stayed exclusively in the Shelter and clients that stayed at times in the Shelter and in motels.
- We interviewed DSS employees from the four neighboring counties to discuss the management and monitoring of their temporary housing programs and the strategies used to provide services to their homeless population.
- We judgmentally selected 40 applications processed in 2013 and 2014 and 40 applications processed in 2015 to determine the length of time for applicants to be denied or approved and if the processing time decreased after the County hired a dedicated housing examiner in September 2014.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with GAGAS. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective.

APPENDIX C

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