

Testimony of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns
Katie Buckley, Director, Federal Funding Assistance Program
House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development
Regarding: Municipal Technical Assistance Program
January 31, 2024

Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the Municipal Technical Assistance Program. My name is Katie Buckley, and I am the Director of the Federal Funding Assistance Program with Vermont League of Cities and Towns, which represents all 247 cities and towns in Vermont. I am the lead for VLCT's MTAP work.

VLCT's Role In MTAP

VLCT has been working closely with the Agency of Administration (AoA) since 2021 when ARPA funds were allocated to both the State of Vermont (+\$1B) and directly to municipalities (+\$200M). Our work overlapped in that local ARPA funds could be used to leverage the State's ARPA programs. We communicated regularly and coordinated together with the goal of optimizing this rare moment. As ARPA rolled out, quickly other major federal funding opportunities began to emerge, like IJJA and IRA. Vermont municipalities were suddenly flooded with new federal grant opportunities almost every day – it has been overwhelming, even for those of us with grant savvy. This rare moment has shined a bright light on the capacity gap that exists at the local level to access these funds. Act 3, which contains MTAP, was passed to help close this gap by **bringing** capacity to municipalities.

When the MTAP opened and the RFP was released, VLCT did not intend to apply. After several discussions with AoA and the regional planning commissions, there was agreement that VLCT would partner with the RPCs, and come in as a subcontractor under Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Commission's master agreement with AoA. In early summer, VLCT executed a subgrant agreement with TRORC for a specific Scope of Work which included the following:

1. Develop Program Materials and Resources - Developed materials to support the Program both for RPC staff and for preapproved municipalities. Some of these included:
 - Developed a Frequently Asked Questions resource for RPC staff
 - Drafted a simple synopsis of Act 3, Section 95 for RPC staff
 - Created the slide deck used for the MTAP Kick-Off meeting with lead staff from RPCs that would be working directly with preapproved towns.
 - Created concise, consistent messaging and program materials that communicated what the Program is, eligible entities for participation, services and benefits, eligible activities, eligible project types, ways to access the Program.
 - Built webpage: <https://www.vlct.org/vermont-municipal-technical-assistance-program>
2. Offer MTAP [Consults on Call](#) Service – One-hour version of our regular 30-minute service which starts with a Teams consultation with VLCT Federal Funding Assistance Program staff, preapproved town and RPC staff. During the session, participants receive one-on-one help finding federal funding opportunities for eligible projects. After the session, the municipality

receives a letter-form report deliverable that includes a project summary, critical project details, potential sources of funding, suggested action steps, referrals to additional services and resources.

3. Perform Program Outreach:

- **All** MTAP towns received direct emails from me to announce the program as well as follow up emails. Emails from my email account don't end up in SPAM or lost in a form email blast from a platform like Constant Contact. They know me from my work supporting VLCT's ARPA Assistance and Coordination Program – I have worked with almost all of them since 2021.
- Emails sent: VLCT has a robust database of municipal official contact information thanks to its newly implemented association management system. We can quickly pull distribution lists for customized municipal mailings, like the preapproved MTAP towns:
 - 7/3/23 - Email sent to all preapproved towns (62) to introduce Program. It contained links and attachments (letter, 1-page program summary document, RPC contacts). The email was sent to the following town roles: all legislative body members, town clerks, treasurers, clerk-treasurers, town managers, town administrators, administrative assistants to selectboards – a total of 265 recipients.
 - 8/22/23 – Follow up nudge sent to same distribution list as July 3rd mailing (265 recipients).
 - 10/12/23 – Follow up nudge and announcement of program expansion adding 65 more municipalities to the preapproved list (265 recipients).
 - 10/13/23 – Email sent to 65 towns newly added to the expanded preapproved list. The email was sent to the following town roles: all legislative body members, town clerks, treasurers, clerk-treasurers, town managers, town administrators, administrative assistants to selectboards – total of 391 recipients.
- Perform general outreach:
 - 11/9/23 - [NEK Together Conference](#) – Leveraging Municipal Resources (MTAP) presentation with NVDA staff
 - 12/12/23 - Partnered with AoA to host an [MTAP informational webinar](#)

As the Program has evolved, and additional technical service providers have been added, it made sense for VLCT to have a direct agreement with AoA, mainly to reduce administrative burden on VLCT. Effective December 31st, VLCT closed out its agreement with TRORC; we are in the process of executing a new grant agreement with AoA. We will continue to implement our original Scope of Work with the RPCs but now also extend it to other providers, as well as add tasks as directed by AoA to support the Program.

VLCT's Observations of MTAP

Local governments, which are largely volunteer run, are stretched under normal circumstances. The complexity of municipal operations and administration has grown exponentially; the pressure of the sustained global pandemic has exacerbated this. In March 2023, the Town Meeting Day elections

resulted in many local officials either leaving their posts or being voted out. The result was that over 1/3 of local officials were newly elected in their roles, many of whom had no experience with local government. Just 3 months into their new roles, the worst disaster in Vermont's history hit. There was no soft entry into local leadership here – more like a rude introduction. Adding the response and recovery from severe flooding, managing cash flow against mounting debt, and carrying out a complicated, difficult FEMA process while waiting for slow to arrive reimbursements.... well, it is all-consuming, even for the most seasoned. It is understandable that local officials shifted their attention away from MTAP, as did the MTAP Providers, many of whom were also engaged in recovery activities. Higher priorities prevailed when weighed with limited resources. After a pause, MTAP was kickstarted again in mid-October when the program expanded by 65 preapproved towns for a total of 127 and program uptake increased as more towns with more capacity were in the 2nd round.

The intent of MTAP is spot-on: to **bring** capacity to smaller towns that lack the resources to develop projects and access federal and state funding opportunities that only exist now. What was not considered in the conceptualization of Act 3 was that most small towns operate on a shoe-string budget from a reactionary position. They do not have robust long-range planning and a list of prioritized shovel-ready projects waiting for a funding source, like large municipalities do. If they are lucky, they might have a wish list and that's it - most often it is for highway related items. Projects take time to develop, even when they have dedicated, skilled capacity behind them. Additionally, the types of projects that are eligible for MTAP are not those that the high scoring towns on the [Vermont Community Index](#) would be taking on like housing, community recovery, workforce development, business support, community and economic development. Some might be considering water and sewer (in support of housing and small businesses like a seated café in a village center) and now many more, because of the floods, will have climate change mitigation and resilience projects. But the reality is that most small Vermont towns need new highway garages, fire stations, improvements to their town offices, repairs to or replacements of their crumbling bridges and, of course, paving. None of these projects have flash or glamour but they are the reality of Vermont's municipalities since their only source of revenue is their property tax.

VLCT is excited to be part of MTAP and looks forward to the data the program will yield and the lessons we will learn. It will provide us with valuable information to help build capacity in local government, versus bringing capacity in times of crisis.

Again, thank Chair, and Committee members for this opportunity to share VLCT's thoughts on MTAP with you.