

# Homelessness Bill of Rights Testimony

Greetings esteemed body. My name is Will Eberle and I reside in Northfield Vermont. I am the Executive Director of the Vermont Association of Mental Health and Addiction Recovery and a person who has experienced homelessness as a child and adult.

I am here today to testify in support of H. 132 - an act relating to establishing a homeless bill of rights and prohibiting discrimination against persons without homes.

I'd like to start by taking a moment to thank Representatives Stevens of Waterbury, Bartley of Fairfax, Bluemle of Burlington, Burke of Brattleboro, Burrows of West Windsor, Carroll of Bennington, Garofano of Essex, Graning of Jericho, Howard of Rutland City, Krasnow of South Burlington, LaBounty of Lyndon, LaMont of Morristown, McCann of Montpelier, McGill of Bridport, Patt of Worcester, Stone of Burlington, and Whitman of Bennington for sponsoring the bill. Please accept my apologies for any name mispronunciations.

H. 132 articulates a *Homeless Bill of Rights* which provides a host of critical protections to prevent discrimination towards Vermonters experiencing homelessness and those who are perceived to be experiencing homelessness. In addition to my own lived experience with homelessness I have spent nearly two decades helping Vermonters without housing access a wide range of desired services and work to secure stable housing, employment, educational attainment, and other goals; and overcome crushing poverty, vicious trauma backgrounds, and acute challenges with mental health and substance use.

My own life is a testament to the fact that people can and do recovery from these challenges, and stable housing is foundational to that process. What does not help that process, is facing abuse, condemnation, and exclusion from the places and resources needed to change your life based on pernicious fears, assumptions, and internal biases we continue to cling on to regarding homelessness, in the face of overwhelming evidence that homelessness can happen suddenly to anyone due to myriad unforeseeable circumstances out of anyone's control, impervious to our careful planning, virtuous actions, and good decisions.

Please know that this bill represents a real solution to a real problem. It does not provide an abstract response to a theoretical need. Right now, people experiencing homelessness *do* face constant public ire for their economically disadvantaged standing in communities across Vermont and they face discrimination based on this status or the

perception of it which has direct, deleterious, effects not just on their sense of identify but on their wellbeing and opportunities to improve their circumstances. This discrimination is rampant, particularly in our more isolated and rural communities, though we are seeing it steadily grow in our urban centers as well. It is wielded to attempt to preclude Vermonters in greatest need of housing supports and access to public spaces and critical resources from obtaining the very things that could change their lot.

When we prevent vulnerable people from accessing the things they need to thrive we founder their prospects and we degrade our collective experience. We deny ourselves the opportunity to live in communities which fully realize the gifts of all our citizens. We send the message to future generations that we do not care for the well being of all Vermonters, just those with the social and political capitol to advocate for their own concerns.

Passing H. 132 is a necessary step in establishing a framework to afford foundational protections and assurances for Vermonters living on the lowest rung of our economic system. It is not a panacea, but it is a good start. It will do much to imbue these citizens with dignity and respect and the sense that they can expect to enjoy the positive regard and protection of Vermont communities in the same ways that people enjoying affluence, social and political capitol, and positional influence do.

H. 132 begins to illuminate the promise Vermont can realize when we ensure all among us have all they need to enjoy health, happiness, and the realization of their potential. To achieve that promise, however, we will need to pair protective legislation like this with greatly expanded ongoing investments in permanent supported housing, peer support, mental health and substance use focused-services, medical supports, supported employment, educational attainment, and many other social determinants of health.

In this moment we collectively face, when Vermont's homelessness, mental health, and substance use crises have reached a scope and acuity never before encountered in our lifetimes, a seachange in the investments we make and the approaches we use will be required to steer away from the shoals of our current trajectory to the era of vibrance, health, and prosperity we know to be possible.

All of this must be built upon a foundation of unconditional high regard, dignity, empathy, and respect for all Vermonters, a foundation H. 132 lays masterfully.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Will Eberle

Executive Director

Vermont Association of Mental Health and Addiction Recovery