

Hi, Good Morning.

For the record: I am Bryan Plant II from Bristol VT. I was born in Burlington and raised in Chittenden County. I graduated highschool in Essex Jct., and then graduated with an Associates Degree from Champlain College. I have worked in retail, home healthcare, as a contractor for the US Immigration & Naturalization Service, and ultimately as an Occupancy Analyst for JPMorgan Chase. I am a son, a brother, an uncle, and a friend to many. I am a writer, an artist, a nerd, and a novice ukulele player.

From late October 2020 thru mid August 2021 I lived at the John Graham Shelter in Vergennes. This was followed by 2 years in transitional housing, through the SRO program, from August 2021 until September 2023. On September 1st, 2023 I successfully leased up a newly built apartment in Bristol.

At the time I entered the shelter, I believed that this was the lowest point in my life. Boy, was I wrong. Just prior to entering the shelter, an acquaintance of a good friend, familiar with the system, helped me start the mountain of paperwork required to acquire services. The plan prior to moving into the shelter was this acquaintance would run point (volunteering her time), and the shelter staff would provide support. That did not happen, after a week I was essentially ghosted... the paperwork we filled out was never submitted. After wasting 2 months, it was finally cleared up, and I had to start over from scratch. This also began the process of regular changes with service coordinators. If you count the initial advocate, I'm now on #11 (in 3 years). This is not unique for people experiencing homelessness.

It was around that same time that I began to try to access the Federal Government's Lifeline Program for free cell phone service. Vermont is serviced by QLink. Their actions forced me to go without a phone for months, and they wouldn't help me when I didn't have coverage. This took close to 6 months to resolve - a huge barrier to keeping up with appointments and services.

In late January/early February 2021 I was presented with the opportunity to participate in the Single Room Occupancy or SRO program, which provides a path to obtaining a Housing Choice/Section 8 voucher. This would be my first experience with filling out VSHA paperwork. I filled out the 20+ page application and provided financial information as requested. In April I was asked to refresh the financial information... which included filling out the application, in full, for a second time. About 2 months later I heard back that I was accepted into the program. The lack of timeframes and communication was problematic... let alone the time it took. When months go by, it's easy if you're dealing with something like depression for doubt, despair, and hopelessness to set in. The system has let us down so many times, why should we believe it won't now?

I said earlier that I thought moving into the shelter was the lowest point in my life. I was wrong, it would be August 25th, 2021. This was the day of my disability hearing... and my move to my SRO unit. The hearing was grueling because your life is laid bare for people to sift through all the worst things about your life, confirming them... while others are actively trying to deny you

assistance. This experience nearly broke me. I was then unceremoniously moved to my SRO unit, without contact from any of my support network for several days. These were people I had depended on, who knew how hard this was for me, knew how poor my health was... my limited ability to get around... thought I had built connections with... I was left to flounder for several days.

Thankfully I made it through the initial move in period. I could go on about various programs that were supposed to help with one thing or another (example furniture), but fell short. I did receive VERAP and ultimately I was fortunate with the decision on my disability case... But with a favorable decision, came losing some benefits. The Fed giveth, and the state taketh away. I was able to keep Medicaid during the COVID emergency order, it helped greatly with covering my many medications, counseling appointments, physical therapy, and durable medical equipment. With the rescinding of the emergency order, I am no longer eligible for Medicaid. I have already begun to see my concerns come to life. The copays for counseling alone force me to go less often. Additionally, in losing Medicaid, I am no longer eligible for phone service through the Lifeline Program.

Over the course of the next two years while trying to get my life back on track, every few months it seemed like some agency or another needed paperwork filled out. Someone actually needs to read through the questions, because many are often unclear... especially when a person is worried that one wrong answer can get them dropped from a program... and the long wait to possibly get benefits restored. It strikes me that it is so confusing that even service coordinators get them wrong or are stumped by them. This is made even worse by the unrealistic turnaround request times. If I never see another 10 day required response request, it will be too soon. That's received, not postmarked. The request often shows up 4 days after it's dated/printed... which gives a person roughly 24 to 48 hours to gather the info, and get it back in the mail. Service coordinators are rarely available to meet on such short notice, due to their caseloads... and if multiple clients receive the same requests, somebody gets left in the cold. The fear/stress/panic/anxiety that this evokes in the many, many clients who struggle with mental illness echoes for days & weeks. Trust me, you have no idea how much damage this does to people. It's especially insulting when the response packet then sits on a desk for weeks or even months. This is not acceptable, it is an area that I hope you will look at.

As stated earlier, I am successfully housed as of September. My Section 8 voucher almost didn't get extended. For those unfamiliar with the SRO program, a person accepted into the program spends a year in a transitional living space, and at the end of 1 year, if they are in good standing, become eligible for Section 8. Currently it is the ONLY clear path for many to receive assistance and available in only limited places. At the end of my year, I was deemed no longer eligible for the subsidy at the location I was living. I could stay there paying full rent on the space, but VSHA would provide no assistance. I was also informed that I would have only 6 months to use the voucher or lose it, in other words treated like, if I didn't find a place, I was doing something wrong... and that it might be possible to receive a short extension. Anyone familiar with the housing situation in Vermont knows how limited the supply is, how high the rents are, and how dire the situation truly is. I conducted my search, but was having very

little success in this effort. In November 2022, via my service coordinator (#9 for those keeping track) began to reach out to VSHA to make the extension process easier, the 6 month period was set to end Jan 30, 2023.

We reached out 5 times, before receiving a brief response asking who this request was for... even though my name was clearly provided multiple times. The holidays occurred, to which we reached out 5 more times before the deadline. We reached out 8 more times before getting a response in late March. In April I received a letter telling me I was terminated from the program due to inactivity, but could request an appeal. I requested an appeal, only to follow up with VSHA to have them tell me they felt a hearing was unnecessary unless my financial situation had changed. I then had to fire back that they kept dodging my questions, that I had spent months trying to get answers to... they kept referencing stuff I already knew, and that if a hearing was the only way to get heard... I demanded one. VSHA reluctantly agreed to have a hearing.

Prior to the hearing, I provided them with cell phone call logs (date/number/time) and all email correspondence. 15 minutes before the hearing, I received a hearing cancellation notice, and an email with a soft apology... reinstating me back into the program... with them needing... updated financials and the filling out of another 20+ page questionnaire. I want to be clear, this is not an uncommon story. If I didn't keep fighting and keep those records, I might not be housed today. How is someone going through their worst days, facing challenges whether it's substance use disorder, trauma, or mental health roadblocks... if their service coordinators are not bringing their "A game"... going to get the help they need? And why are people who are experiencing this always held to a higher standard, than providers, state agencies and others? They can miss deadlines, we cannot. They can lose paperwork, we cannot.

I've somehow made it through. Mine is a success story. Unfortunately, the problem of homelessness is not going away. It cannot be ignored. I've returned to Montpelier today to try and finish bookending that chapter in my life, to give it some meaning while I figure what comes next. If able, I'd still like to return in some capacity to being a productive member of society. Since I was last here I've conducted interviews with the VT Housing & Conservation Board, the VT Food Bank, & Addison Housing Works. I've submitted letters of intent to join the board of directors for 2 orgnations, likely to be made official by mid year. Additionally I intend to participate in Mental Health Awareness later this month and I continue to do some volunteer work with the Counseling Service of Addison County. I do not consider myself an advocate, but it's certainly a path unfolding before me should I take it. I do hope by continuing to share my experiences, it lands in the ears of those that need to hear it. That instead of pulling up the ladder behind me, the process gets smoother and less painful for those who still have nowhere to go.

I appreciate your time. Thank you.