

Ken Russell Testimony to House General and Military Affairs  
January 18, 2024

Good Morning. My name is Ken Russell, I'm the Executive Director of Another Way, a drop-in center for those experiencing mental health challenges at 125 Barre Street in Montpelier. We have a proud forty-year history as a peer organization, as an alternative to the medical model of psychiatric care. Many of the folks who come to our building lack housing, many are experiencing an existential crisis. They find daytime sanctuary in our building. We offer a warm cup of coffee, friendship, and peer support. Folks are treated with kindness and respect.

At night, they might stay at the Good Samaritan Haven overflow shelter or at campsites throughout the city. Some are desperate. They may have medical challenges, they may be amputees, may be diabetic, may be incontinent. They may be coming from a hospital, a psychiatric ward, a shelter, or a motel room. They may have been exited because of one bad moment. They were unable to manage the stresses of their situation, to navigate a domestic dispute, or to successfully ride-out their own inner turmoil. They have fallen through the cracks.

It is hard, it is raw, it is debilitating.

People are staring at the abyss, isolated from family, suffering from trauma, anxiety, other mental health challenges, and the very real physical challenges of living outdoors.

Of course, the real chasm is the utter lack of affordable housing. Regular folks have no chance of competing in this housing market. Folks who are doing everything right are living in the woods at your local park-and-ride. They are seeking a doorway, the underside of a porch, or heating vents where they can lay down cardboard in an attempt to keep their gear dry. During the day, they drag themselves and their gear across town to get coffee, do laundry, make plans for the next night. Some are able to muster enough grit, determination and alignment of stars to apply for and obtain employment. They may have a baby, they may have a family, they may have an infectious laugh, but they are out of luck.

When folks arrive at the Another Way house, we work with them, often to get emergency housing support. We rely on a dedicated network of church volunteers, outreach workers, service providers, and public servants who scramble to cobble together a solution. Many times we come up short. Many times this is a night by night solution. Twenty four hours elapses and we are in the same situation. It is demoralizing. Motel rooms have become hard to find. The Hilltop and The Econolodge have stopped offering rooms. Shelter space is often full. Sometimes the best we can do is to issue a sleeping bag and tent, and a strategy to find a perch where they may avoid the backlash of a fellow citizen, of a landlord or security company. Once again, we fall short.

It is up to those with more resources, to those with homes and second homes, those with bank accounts, those in charge of service organizations and state agencies to figure out a response that can make a difference. Housing economics is like the ocean. I am hoping folks in this

building are mustering a significant enough response to make a difference there. Meanwhile, we will continue to plug the gaps, and serve the coffee.

We have a memorial wall at Another Way. It has dozens and dozens of names of people our community has lost. On a regular basis, we have folks approaching the butcher paper it is written on, with a marker, to record the name of a friend or a loved one. It is a basic medium but the humanity of it is overwhelming. These are poignant moments, many a tear has been shed, but witnessing and participating in this simple ritual has touched us all deeply.

There's one important side of all of this. It's the side where people show up for people, where mutual care and determination allow survival, where smart folks with big hearts help build a better world. I have seen this spirit in these rooms. I am placing my bet on these better angels, and working hard to see this approach prevail.

Thank you for your time.

-Ken Russell, Executive Director, Another Way. M (802) 503-5068.