



Testimony for the House Human Services Committee

January 31, 2024

By

Linda Anderson

Capstone Community Action - Director of Family & Community Support Services

Dear members of the House and Means Committee,

Thank you for allowing us to share some of the struggles we face as service providers to assist our community members to access safe, affordable housing along with some of the tools we believe could be helpful in combatting the housing crisis we are currently facing.

For the record, my name is Linda Anderson. I am currently serving as the Director of Family and Community Support Services for Capstone Community Action. I have worked with our housing program in one way or another for the last 12 years. I have a range of experiences and expertise around the challenges our community members and service providers face, and the services that sometimes do, and do not, succeed.

Our experience continues to prove that no one solution will resolve the housing crisis. Our community members come to us with a wide variety of experiences, strengths, barriers and needs. We do our best to provide holistic services, knowing that many areas of a person's life impact their housing stability.

Between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2022, the number of households we provided housing services to, remained fairly constant – averaging approximately 118 households. That number has grown considerably since that time. From July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023 we served 557 households (representing 1,063 people).

One of the many challenges we have faced as service providers is the ability to recruit sufficient staff quickly enough to support the multiple changing needs, from serving community members in the hotels, to managing the ERAP program, to addressing the changing needs of our participants. I am pleased to say that our housing program is now fully staffed.

At Capstone Community Action we offer housing counseling services that help people navigate the housing system to achieve stability by addressing barriers to housing. We currently serve as the Coordinated Entry Lead Agency in Lamoille and Washington Counties and as an Assessment Partner in Orange Windsor North. Over the years, support for housing services has grown to allow more robust housing supports. We are now able to not only provide housing navigation which can include, among other things, budget coaching, identifying barriers, identifying action steps to address those barriers, seeking options for housing (unfortunately those options are few and far between currently), and helping people access funds to get into housing. We are also able to provide housing retention services for some households which is ongoing medium term case management services (up to 24 months) to help them retain housing, based on their

20 Gable Place, Barre, VT 05641-4138
(802) 479-1053 | (800) 639-1053 | (802) 479-5353 Fax | www.capstonevt.org

needs and eligibility. This might be a continuation of work to address ongoing barriers to maintaining stable housing, coaching around tenancy skills, etc.

Additionally, we manage 6 Emergency Scattered Site units in Washington county providing family shelter options. We are working with OEO to expand it to 9 units. The folks in this program receive intensive case management during their stay, meeting up to 3 times a week. Because there are currently NO shelters in our entire service area for families, these rental units are specifically for families with children. As units become available households are referred to the program. The case manager screens households for compatibility with the program. Participants must engage in intensive case management during their stays. The case manager works with them to address barriers, seek permanent housing options, and connect them to the necessary resources to maintain stability once they leave the program. This is designed as a short-term shelter program – up to 3 months but there are options to extend if appropriate.

Our housing services work! I am proud to share that of the 557 households we served between July 1, 2022 through June 30, 2023 – whether through coordinated entry assessment and light case management through more intensive case management in our Emergency Scattered Site program, we helped 105 households (representing 184 people) obtain safe and affordable housing. We also helped another 30 households (representing 61 people) avoid eviction.

Additionally, according to current data, between July 1, 2023 and January 26, 2024 we have helped 49 households (representing 92 people) obtain safe and affordable housing. We also helped another 28 households (representing 76 people) avoid eviction. The problem is that as we house people, there are many more that come to us facing homelessness. For more information about services and outcomes you can review the graphs provided at the end of my testimony. They provide comparisons of people served and outcomes achieved from July 1, 2019 through June 30, 2023.

Service Challenges:

While the ability to provide ongoing supports to households has been an important addition to our case management services, the complexity around the funding continues to be a barrier. OEO has done an amazing job listening to providers about the needs we see and adding flexibility where they are able, but their hands are also tied due to funding regulations which can lead to gaps in our ability to serve people. An example of this is the ability to provide retention case management services to people who were previously literally homeless. With our main funding source (Housing Opportunity Program grant) – we can provide up to 2 years of retention services to households that were identified as at risk of homelessness, but only up to 3 months of services for households that were identified as literally homeless. The funding available for longer term case management is only available if the household has ongoing rental subsidies. Many of our participants don't have subsidies or if they are able to get a voucher, are unable to find an appropriate unit so they can use the voucher. We do have some ERAP funding through June of 2025 that can provide some longer-term case management in some of our locations but it's inconsistent and makes us adapt the people we serve to the service funds we have available instead of adapting the funding to meet the people that come through our doors.

Opportunities for greater success:

Things that we have seen help achieve positive outcomes for our participants include flexibility in direct client assistance. Any tools that allow us to overcome the barriers people face are critical. We have seen a number of instances where something as small as a \$15 - \$60 fee for a birth certificate or other form of ID can completely derail a person's forward momentum. Additionally, the Landlord Liaison role in our Lamoille office, has been critical to our successes. That role that can serve as a bridge between landlords and tenants and help build relationships with landlords to help them feel comfortable taking a chance is an important tool to support our housing counselors. The ability to provide additional case management supports beyond stabilization for households that need it has been important, not only for the participant but also for the peace of mind of a number of our landlords.

Beyond what we currently do that we believe helps us achieve success – we believe there's merit in looking at transition in place models – where an organization master leases units which participants could then take over and eventually assume the lease. Concerns around liability and costs accrued for the provider holding the master lease are a barrier to attempting this currently.

The complexities that exist within the system create additional barriers to our ability to help our homeless and at-risk community members access housing. We need more affordable units, more appropriate housing options for our community members who need supported housing models, sober housing options, etc., and more funding for supportive services with fewer complexities.

Finally we need a greater continuum of care services, where the various agencies engaged with helping support the unhoused work in coordination with one another. The current system does not facilitate this critical work.

Thank you for your time.

**Capstone Community Action Housing Services and Outcomes Data Comparisons
July 1, 2019 – June 30, 2023**

