

**Imagining A Different Future for the Response to Homelessness in Vermont
Testimony to the Vermont House Committee on Human Services
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Thank you, Chair Wood and the Committee for this opportunity to speak to you today, My name is Michael Redmond and I'm the Executive Director of the Upper Valley Haven, a nonprofit social services agency based in Hartford, Vermont, a position I've held for 5 years. The Haven has served the Upper Valley for over 40 years. We're a multi-service organization that focuses on shelter, food, supported housing, community outreach and children's services. Our mission reads "With the support of the Upper Valley community, the Haven assists those who are experiencing poverty to be free from hunger, to be securely housed and to pursue a self-directed life.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today about the challenges we face as a state to address the problems of homelessness. This is a conversation that is happening across the country. Homelessness has become more visible, especially in urban areas. But it's also become increasingly visible in rural and nonmetropolitan areas including Vermont. Prior to COVID, Vermont had one of the lowest incidences of homelessness. And now, as we know all too well, we have the 2nd highest per capita rate.

What happened? Truly higher numbers? Better counting? Something else? What are the causes? Population and household formation trends? Loss of available housing for multiple reasons? Insufficient additions to supply over a long period? All of these to some degree probably. I don't think we know the answer entirely. More certainty will emerge in time.

One reason the count of people who are unhoused or in shelter is certainly due to the wise and effective response to COVID that recognized that this public health emergency needed to support people who were unhoused or precariously housed to reduce the chances of infection leading to serious health consequences. We turned to the use of motels to increase temporary shelter that would be safer and it worked as a public health strategy. Vermont should continue to feel good about this. But Vermont is finding it challenging to remove this intervention after the public health emergency has receded because of the implications for those who still need shelter. Perhaps this is a good thing as shelter is still being offered. But we need to do better because the current system isn't working. And shelter isn't the goal.

Addressing homelessness is of course related to the need for affordable housing for everyone. I'll offer some thoughts about how we should think about increasing the supply and some principles and practices that we should begin with. But I also want to speak to the need for interim housing solutions that we need immediately that are part of this continuum. Improvements to the GA Emergency Housing program included in this conversation.

I'll start with some background information about the Upper Valley Haven. This morning, you heard from Frank Knack, the new director of the Housing & Homelessness Alliance of Vermont. One of Frank's points was that HHAV and its member organizations are ready to work with the administration and legislature to design and establish programs that provide safe and habitable interim housing for all households experiencing homelessness. The Haven is a proud member of HHAV and I serve as Treasurer of this advocacy organization. Knowing a little bit about the Haven provides a sense of the resources available in the state that is replicated in more than 60 other organizations working in Vermont.

At our main location in White River Junction, we operate a shelter for 20 adults and a second shelter for 8 families. The adult shelter comprises 10 double occupancy rooms, public spaces for congregate meals and socialization and offices for staff. The family shelter provides private spaces for the families and public spaces for socialization and kitchens where families can prepare their meals. Beyond providing a safe place for our guests, we help people connect with essential services that will assist them while they work to secure housing. The shortage of available housing and high cost has created significant challenges. Average Lengths of Stay in these shelters have climbed to 172 days in the Hixon adult shelter and 135 days in the Byrne family shelter. We also just opened a winter season shelter across the river in Lebanon, NH for 15 beds. And with the help of new language in last year's Home Act (thank you), in December the Town of Hartford approved our application to build a 20 bed low barrier shelter in White River Junction that we plan to open in time for the winter of 2025.

We also focus on supported housing as an evidence-based practice that follows a Housing First model. At present, we support 18 tenants in a Lebanon housing project constructed by our low income housing partner, Twin Pines Housing, with project based rent support vouchers for people who were "chronic homeless" in HUD's definition with supported housing services provided by the Haven. In Vermont, we participate in Vermont's Family Supported Housing program, administered by OEO for 30 families. FSH uses Medicaid dollars for supported housing case management, a practice that is being expanded in the state's new State Medicaid Plan.

We're also very excited that we will be able to expand our supported housing services through VSHA's A Way Home initiative. Again, working with our low income community housing partner, Twin Pines Housing, we will provide supported housing to 18 tenants who are chronic homeless in a new project being constructed right next to our campus in WRJ which will open this September. Twin Pines is also converting a local motel to affordable housing units and through A Way Home we'll have 8 units available with project based voucher rent support and Haven supportive services. Another 4 units in another project in WRJ now under construction will have a similar partnership of Twin Pines as housing manager and Haven providing supportive services to help tenants remain successfully housed.

The Haven manages the Coordinated Entry list for our district working in partnership with multiple agencies that standardizes the way individuals and families at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness access are assessed for and referred to the housing and services

that they need for housing stability. At present, there are 337 individuals in 270 households on the CE list in our district.

Finally, the Haven staff are active in community outreach, housing stabilization and housing navigation. Our team welcomes everyone who calls or stops in with problems for which they seek our assistance. The vast majority concern housing – search and retention. Through funding from OEO we can provide individual grants that meet specific criteria to prevent homelessness and eviction or secure housing to help with rent payments, car repairs, medical bills, fines, etc. This same team works in the community with unsheltered populations traveling to where people are living – in the woods, under bridges, in their cars. Our goals are to help people survive but also to try to connect them to systems such as coordinated entry and to encourage them to use our shelter, food and other services. We want no one to think they are forgotten.

I share this overview so that you can see the extensive work we undertake, a lot of it with support from grants from the Office of Economic Opportunity, though we raise significant private funding as well.

So what ideas come out of this experience? Some have been offered by others providing testimony or in other reports, op-eds and information exchanges.

As a state, we should set goals and create a plan. We know the numbers. Solving these related problems will take years. We should set a broad long-term goal, but set interim goals for each year that will be the fruit of solid planning.

Plans should reflect best practices. You heard this morning about the importance of Housing First. This should be at the core of our planning. There are other lessons we know from national experience, our own in Vermont and supported by research. We should do what we believe works and avoid practices that might provide some satisfaction by removing visible reminders of the problem, but do nothing to help solve it.

We need to address the supply of housing that's affordable and not only targeted to people who are unhoused, but more broadly. But we also need effective interim housing solutions such as shelter expansion, conversion of motels and other ideas.

Services in shelters are imperative. They need to be funded fully. Day programs need to be in place everywhere too. These help build the connections that can lead to change. OEO requires this and they should be fully funded by the legislature. For example, only 10% overhead is included for all supervisory staff and expenses of operating an organization with a physical plant. We can do better.

Use the power of the state wisely but to break through the bottlenecks in local regulation. My commendations to the Governor and legislature for passing the Home Bill last year (Act 47) that included emergency shelters as places that need to be included in municipality planning. Only in effect since September and already two emergency shelters in St. Johnsbury and Hartford that

would have faced strong local opposition were approved. In each case Act 47 was cited as the overriding law of the land.

What else could be accomplished in this way? The legislative agenda seems to be taking up this question this session with Act 250 so this is very positive. Are there other opportunities to use this emergency to override local rules and practices that are barriers to solutions?

The supply of new housing coming through the VHCB pipeline is impressive due to the infusion of dollars through COVID recovery. We have also welcomed and commend VHCB for its higher goals for targets for people who are homeless. Continued support of expansion of federal dollars at this levels is important.

But we also need to continue the efforts to expand supply through other means. Funding for repair to bring housing units back on line has also been impressive. Seeking less expensive alternatives such as manufactured housing would seem to be needed. How can the state help create more spaces where these resident owned communities can be built or expanded. The price point compared to new construction should be convincing.

Eviction prevention is another area in which some principles need to be established in regulations and law. Special attention to people who should have protections due to disability status should be included.

Returning to interim housing –

Shelters are important because their impact is greater than the number of beds. For example, when we operated a winter season shelter prior to COVID – the 15 beds we offered service 96 different people over the course of the winter. This flexibility is important. Best practice is to provide some permanency for guests who will use the shelter more frequently but to always have space for people who are more transitory.

The complexity of the people we serve is increasing. We are seeing more older people – 20% over the age of 60 – with many chronic health issues. The presence of co-occurring mental health issues is also a challenge. As is the need for recovery services for substance use. My staff has had to provide personal care for some guests because there is no one or organization available. This is all asking too much.

We can't organize and secure the services we need from the local level. We need the state to undertake this effort – as part of its state plan – to bring together the agencies and services delivered by the state or local agencies under contract. It would seem this should be a primary ask of this committee to the commissioners and secretaries of the administration – what are you doing together to give priority to this emergency and to plan for its solution over what period of time.

A renewal of the Roadmap to End Homelessness, last updated in 2015 is one place to start to set out the principles and goals. Included in this should be a Homeless Bill of Rights and a right to shelter.

In the GA Emergency Housing program, by all means strike better deals with the motel owners. This includes not only price but also standards that need to be a state priority. We have annual habitability inspections from OEO for our shelters. If the motels are being used as shelters, the same level of standards should be in effect to address safety, minimal services and sanitation.