

Testimony of Sue Minter
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Before the House Committee on Environment and Energy
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Good afternoon and thank you for the invitation to speak with you about housing and equity and some of the challenges vulnerable Vermonters face in 2023.

For the record I am Sue Minter, Executive Director of Capstone Community Action, a community-based anti-poverty non-profit established in 1965 serving Washington, Lamoille and Orange Counties. Capstone and is one of five (5) Community Action Agencies in Vermont that make up the Vermont Community Action Agency Partnership (VCAP).

The great folks who work for Capstone are really on the front lines of the war on poverty, providing crisis support for those who face food insecurity, housing insecurity and homelessness or just enough heat to stay warm through the winter. We also build ladders out of poverty by providing the tools and opportunities to help our clients gain economic self-sufficiency and self-esteem.

So, I am here to provide perspective from the lens of watching Vermonters literally wait outside in the dead of winter, without warm clothes, just for our food shelf to open. I speak from a place of seeing the economic and racial divide in Vermont continue to grow – and experiencing the trauma and despair among a growing number of Vermonters as we try to “exit” this global pandemic. And I am here, to reflect on the bill before you, and provide perspective on the great urgency for literally thousands of Vermonters who will soon be unhoused from area hotels or who face eviction from the inability to pay their rent.

It is clear from every level that we have a severe housing shortage in Vermont. And this shortage is negatively affecting every region of our state. I know you have learned the macro picture of the current under supply of housing and increasing demand and concurrent escalation of price of our existing housing stock.

Lack of a stable and growing housing supply means that Vermont's economy faces stagnation, without adequate ability to attract a diverse and growing workforce and threatening business growth and community vitality.

It is clear to me that Vermont needs to rapidly scale up housing and housing density of all types, and at all income levels, as quickly as possible.

And in this time of racial reckoning, Vermont needs to also face the structural inequality and racism that is built into the many forms of restrictions and regulations that have become significant barriers to building housing throughout Vermont.

And this is why I strongly support S.100, which seeks to remove some of these barriers. It is also why I am working with other Committees of jurisdictions to increase funding for the supply of affordable housing & shelters along with supportive housing services.

As a matter of full disclosure & potential relevance, I also have a history of working within the planning field both as a professional planner and a 10-year career working in the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development, in community planning and downtown revitalization, a local planning commissioner and staunch defender of Act 250, and promoter of "Smart Growth" including as Sec of Transport, where I established new programs to expand Public Transportation and marry planning and transportation funds to create "great places" with walkable downtowns and community centers. And now, in my new role combating the causes and conditions of poverty, I have also begun to better understand some of the unintended consequences of some of these very policies in our current economic context.

Over 11, 000 Vermonters will walk through one of our many doors this year seeking healthy food, warmth during our harsh winters, early education programs for vulnerable at-risk children and for help navigating what is best described as a byzantine route of navigation to keep or find a roof over their head. During the last federal fiscal year, Capstone's frontline housing support team worked with 523 families.

We are seeing Vermonters who come to our doors in desperation. They come from all walks of life: senior citizens, families with kids, single working adults, people with disabilities. All are bound together by the common thread of the severe insecurity of losing the stability of a home because they can no longer afford their rent, or the extreme challenge of being unhoused all together.

Right now, there are 375 adults and children sheltered at the area motels in Washington County. In Lamoille County, 146 adults and 46 children were in the motels. And across the state there are over 2200 adults and 620 children who are living in the area hotels. After July 1st their collective fates are unknown.

Capstone staff provides support services, case management and other key tools to lift Vermonters into stable housing. Over the past five months of service, **our housing staff worked with 212 households in search of housing, but only 35 found safe and affordable long-term housing.** This is because there simply is NO AVAILABLE housing for the folks who are unhoused. Despite the new vouchers, the Section 8 program, and the availability of a lifeline – the very resources that used to be a “golden ticket” for our clients-- **there is literally no place to throw the life preserver.** After years of working tirelessly to get our clients into the Vt Emergency Rental Assistance (VERAP) program, we are now faced with letting them know that not only has that program ended, but that there is nowhere for them to go. One Capstone housing counselor sadly calls Section 8 simply, “the program of empty promises”.

Coupled with this gaping disparity of available apartments, vouchers and the skyrocketing rents, we understand the reason why Vermont is ranked second in the country, second only to California, for rate of homelessness. But as difficult as this is right now, **I am deeply worried about what lies ahead.**

During this month of April a cascade of Pandemic era programs are dissolving or gone. April marks the end of the SNAP/ 3 Squares Emergency Allotment which will affect over 70,000 Vermonters. April is also the end of the Everyone Eats food program, which in Central Vermont alone had been providing 5,000 nutritious meals weekly. This month the Medicaid “unwind” is beginning, again affecting low-income Vermonters accessing health care. The VT Child Tax credit is also on the chopping block in this body. And then there is VERAP -- which not only has helped safely house over 2500 Vermonters in area hotels, it has also provided

critical rental assistance for over 10,000 Vermonters. We are only just beginning to see what the effect of removing this rental assistance will mean, as many clients are coming to our aid facing eviction in homes they can no longer afford.

We have not yet experienced the full impact of these programs ending . I am here to tell you that we can't think we'll just go back to the way it was pre pandemic. We are now facing an unprecedented tight housing market and high costs, coupled with high food and fuel for heat and transportation.

At the same time, we are trying to prepare for the unhousing of hundreds of people in Central Vermont. As of right now the state estimates that in WA County alone around 100 people may be unhoused at the end of May, and 200 at the end of June. The General Assistance (GA) program is on the precipice of exiting more people from the motels during the summer than we have ever seen. And we are trying to plan for this with an array of area partners, along with our area public safety community.

The guests we support in the GA subsidized motels are elderly and infirm, disabled, living with mental illness, substance abuse, fleeing domestic violence or simply Vermonters who work every day and return home to a motel. While far from a perfect model, these motels have been the lifeline we can't find in our communities housing stock. Guests have found recovery, jobs, gotten healthy and had their surgeries and found compassion and service providers who believe in their ability to move forward. If these motels close as proposed, we will truly be facing a pandemic of poverty and homelessness across our state.

And, of course, I need not remind you of the very real dangers involved with this moment of supporting people who are unhoused, as we all grieve with the tragic murder of a young Vermonter, Leah Rosin-Pritchard, whose passion was to spread radical love by providing shelter for those in need at Morningside House in Brattleboro,

As difficult as this current situation is, I see signs of hope. I see hope in every victory our staff achieve finding people a home, a healthy meal, and a job. Across the state the Community Action network served 1,480 individuals experiencing homelessness to find permanent housing during the pandemic.

121 Vermonters experiencing homelessness were provided emergency housing, and 714 individuals experienced homelessness and were helped to find permanent housing.

I see hope in the historic investments into affordable housing and new shelters that you all have made through pandemic investments. When built, these will help, although not solve our current challenges.

I see hope in the hard work that has delivered us this needed legislation in S.100. This bill removes barriers and helps incentivize communities to build more housing and greater density. Removing these barriers will be a critical investment in the long term for Vermonters. But, from where I sit, this cannot happen quickly enough.

I want to emphasize that, in particular, I strongly support the section Sec. 4412 (1) (H) which prohibits bylaws from penalizing a hotel from renting rooms to provide housing assistance through the state General Assistance programs as well as section 4413 (a)(1) (G) the bill also restricts the ability of communities to prohibit emergency shelters. Both of these sections will assist the serious need for GA assistance and new shelters.

At this moment of national racial reckoning, and as Vermont seeks to address the forces that continue to make our state unwelcoming to BIPOC Vermonters, we need to think carefully and constructively about the rules we set around where and what people can build or not build. We need to recognize that many of the rules we put in place over decades are now limiting access to young people, to low-income people and to the BIPOC community. These rules are effectively denying the economic diversity that our state and community needs. And they are upholding structural racism that makes our state unwelcoming.

Addressing poverty has never been easy, and our homelessness challenges are not going away. We must forge onward. I believe S. 100 is our chance to begin to unravel those barriers and to enable communities to finally remove those structures that stand in the way of a more diverse, welcoming Vermont.

I will conclude with a quote about Hope from Barack Obama. Because without hope, we have only despair in this difficult moment:

Hope is not blind optimism. It's not ignoring the enormity of the task ahead or the roadblocks that stand in our path. It's not sitting on the sidelines or shirking from a fight. Hope is that thing inside us that insists, despite all evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us if we have the courage to reach for it, and to work for it, and to fight for it. Hope is the belief that destiny will not be written for us, but by us, by the men and women who are not content to settle for the world as it is, who have the courage to remake the world as it should be.

- Barack Obama