

## **Shelby LeBarron Testimony: 2/16/2024 House Human Services**

For the record I am Shelby LeBarron, currently living in Bellows Falls Vermont. I am the mom of two children. One born prematurely this past fall.

I began my experience of homelessness after living for three years in an apartment. We were in a two year court battle because they wouldn't tell us the rental amount. They changed it and wouldn't give us any information. We were ultimately evicted while I was pregnant and had just had surgery. It was like they just wanted us out, they never worked with us on anything. But we had no resources and no power.

We entered the hotel program and were given only 28 days. They called the eviction our fault and didn't give us any of the information that we were allowed to prove that it was beyond our control. But it was a no cause eviction. I was diagnosed with Fetal Growth Restrictions a couple of weeks into living in the motel. I was already under so much stress and was considered high risk, now it was just a matter of time before I would be induced because I could not keep up with what my body needed. About two weeks into that 28 days, we found a letter stuck in our door from End Homelessness Vermont. I began to contact them and found out that we actually qualified for more time.

We were not able to get my situation to qualify before the end of my 28 days, even though it ultimately did. I know that it was a fight for them. I was going to the doctor every other day, wondering when they were going to induce me, because the baby was not able to grow due to the stress. They scheduled my induction with only two days heads up and it was right within a day or two from when I was supposed to be exited. In fact, I started having contractions on the day that I was supposed to be exited. They thought I was in labor. End Homelessness Vermont Paid for us to stay for a couple of days, but within 2 days of our exit date, we got word that they would finally count my eviction under constructive eviction. I don't understand why they didn't count our no cause eviction in the first place. They put my family and my new baby at risk. And we would have been outside with a premature baby and nowhere to go. We had 56 more days because of this.

My family also works with Springfield Supportive Services and they have been supportive and helpful. They come by regularly, but, anyone can tell that their caseloads are so big, which

causes the paperwork that you need to find an apartment or anything else to get mixed up or caught up at times. These people on the ground can't be expected to handle this case load by themselves.

Our days ended before date to date Adverse Weather began, I was very worried, because now I had a premature newborn baby and I didn't know what we were going to do. She was 4 lbs 12 ozs at birth. We had used 84 days, so even that maximum length of time would have left us on the street. Brenda saw our days end approaching and we didn't know, but she was already working on this. But, also, I contacted Rebecca after we talked to Economic Services and was told that we would be sent outside. Very quickly they were able to get a medical exception because Sophie, our baby, had a visiting nurse.

In simple black and white, it looks like 84 days would be enough time to find an apartment to get in there. When you have a no cause eviction, you are pregnant and have a family, that is just not enough time. We were not able to just search for apartments day and night. I was at the doctor and then having a baby and then having a premature newborn. The people at the providers are wonderful people, but, their caseloads are too big and they can't handle that much volume, no one could.

When you are in the hotels, you have the constant stress of will I have a voucher, won't I have a voucher. Is my family going to end up outside? What if I can't get ahold of economic services and then we have to fight to have the benefits that the rules say we qualify for. It is too much and it shouldn't be like this.

Supportive services should have people focused and experts on different individuals, like families, or elderly or people with disabilities. So that people can have the attention that their case needs. People should be able to stay in shelter until they find permanent housing. The income contribution just makes it harder for people to save money to get housed, it is just a barrier to housing.

I have not come across a single person at the hotel who hasn't been on top of what they need to do, and saving money if they have it. But then when your voucher runs out, you end up having to pay nightly and then people have gotten stuck at the hotels for over a year even when they find apartments.

In our situation, even a family shelter would not necessarily be safe because we have a premature baby and we have to be careful about shared living spaces. It would be good if whatever you do, if we have dignity and a say in what happens to us next. Sometimes I feel like nobody looks at people in this situation like an effective part of society and that makes it harder.

There are people out there helping, but not enough is being done. The people that are helping, need more help themselves. I would ask that those of you making the decisions try to put yourselves in our shoes. I want you to truly understand that no one is choosing to live in a motel. We are all just trying to make the best decision for our children and our families.

If we are allowed to stay until June, I don't know what we will do after that, if nothing changes. I want a home, I want somewhere for my family. This is not what I wanted, but I don't have any other choice.

Thank you so much for your time.