

Tamara Hodge Testimony: 2/16/2024 House Human Services

For the record I am Tamara Hodge from Bellows Falls Vermont. I have been in the hotel/motel program since September 1st.

People often talk about people in the program like we aren't even trying. Every day is a whole new battle. My family works closely with Springfield Supportive Housing, my reach up case manager and End Homelessness Vermont. If this program ends and nothing changes, we have no other options and my three kids and I will end up outside like we almost did this fall.

I am from Vermont, born and raised here. I moved from Vermont to South Carolina in May of 2020 to find support in recovery. We moved back to Vermont because my father's health got worse and we were supposed to have a house all set up here. Two weeks after we got here, our house wasn't ready and it turned out the landlord had rented it to someone else. We were left with nowhere to go. We found out about this while sitting in my little Toyota Camry with all of our stuff packed around us and no clue what we were going to do. Living with family was never a possibility for me, so we were left with nothing.

At that point I called 211 and ended up in the hotel/motel program. They gave us only 28 days, because they did not count either my former sister in law or my mother's letter as constructive eviction. At the end of our 28 days, myself and my three kids were going to end up outside, we were offered nothing but a tent, in the middle of October in Vermont. I was terrified. I only have one lung and have to use a nebulizer 4 times a day. I lost my other lung in April of 2019.

At that point, Janice from Springfield Supportive Housing, contacted Brenda at End Homelessness Vermont and asked for them to help us stay sheltered. Rebecca, from End Homelessness Vermont came to the hotel and did an interview to understand our situation better and they helped me gather necessary documentation of our previous living situation and asked for our situation to be considered a constructive eviction. But, it didn't come through quickly enough. End Homelessness Vermont started paying for us day by day...I am not sure, but, I think that it sometimes came out of their own pockets.

Every day, I would get back to the hotel and be locked out and, I would have to go get a new key card because they were paying day by day, waiting for an answer from Economic Services. This process took 3 weeks. I had to keep everything packed in the car. I didn't know what I was going to tell my kids if we had to leave. Throughout this I stayed in contact with Rebecca and Brenda, Janice at Springfield Supportive Services and my case manager at reach up. I know that everyone was trying really hard, but without an answer from the department we were left panicking day by day.

Finally, after three weeks, we got an answer from someone in charge, I don't know who, that they would consider my situation a constructive eviction, giving us 56 more days. I don't why that took so long or why if it counts in the rules, that it wasn't accepted in the first place. I don't understand why my family had to go through this.

This meant that my voucher would run out on December 8th and I would later find out that this would leave a gap between what I had for days and adverse weather rules and right in the middle of winter. Once I found out about this, I panicked that all we had was our car. I made sure the radiator was fixed so that our heat would work, thinking that would be our only option until Adverse Weather took effect.

I have been in recovery for almost 4 years, and it is incredibly important to me that I stay in recovery. But, these rules make it very hard for anyone to continue to have hope and connection. It is hard to see a way out of homelessness, even now.

Around December 1st, I called to renew my voucher and someone at the call center answered. First they told me that I was out of days. Then in a very judgemental tone, they said, "you shouldn't need more days. Why haven't you found somewhere to live if you have been there so long. You have been there too long, you should have found something". I couldn't even say anything. It was humiliating and demeaning. It was so awful. I felt talked down to. I immediately called Brenda, who informed me that I actually had 7 more days. She reported the phone call to someone in management and asked the worker she works with to fix the issue. This still left me with a week gap.

Again, End Homelessness Vermont paid for some days and made sure that there was a night to night voucher any night that Adverse Weather was allowed. Somehow we made it to December 15th. The people that have supported me are not our state system. I have felt ashamed and panicked and there is no way out. However, when I work with Springfield Supportive Services or End Homelessness Vermont, I know that they are both doing everything they can and most importantly, they are treating me like a human being.

I am staring at March 15th, unsure what is going to happen. I have been assured that we will probably be able to stay until June 30th, but, until we know for sure, that panic is there. And what do we do after June 30th if we still have no way out.

People don't realize that finding housing that is big enough for me and three kids that I can afford is nearly impossible. I have applied for every three bedrooms or more out there. I did not expect to have to go through this before. The only other time that I have experienced homelessness, was eight years ago, when I left an abusive partner. That was brief and there was a way out.

Waiting on the phone for hours and hours and if nobody picks up before 4:30 you are out of luck, endless panicked days, applying GA rules incorrectly which leaves people outside and no housing is not how our system should work. There are so many people that I have met in this program, in the hotel I am in now, that if they end up on the street, I don't know if they will make it.

At the moment in our lives when we needed the most support, it feels like we are just at a constant risk of ending up outside. I don't understand how that can be done to children, people who are aging, disabled people or anyone else really. A supportive system would ensure our safety until we found permanent housing. I don't understand how anyone can think it is ok to put people outside. It just doesn't make sense to me.

I am fortunate to have found Springfield Supportive Services and End Homelessness Vermont. What about the people that don't? If you are creating a new system, then please keep us safe. Please keep us sheltered. Everyone deserves to be inside. We are human beings and sometimes it feels like we are treated like animals. We need support, not rules. We need dignity, not shame.

Thank you so much for letting me share my story today. I hope that it helps to make a better system and that it will help the next person in my situation, because I would not wish this on my worst enemy.

All of us are trying. I hope that you all see that. All we need is a chance.