

## **Brenda Siegel Testimony: BAA Senate Appropriations**

I am the Executive Director of End Homelessness Vermont and am submitting this written testimony in this capacity. However, I want to make you aware of two other hats that I wear. I work with a national organization, heading up a research center on the overdose crisis, and have been working across the state and country on this issue and as this committee knows, I have experienced multi generational loss due to overdose. I also do consulting work on all things human services, most prominently housing/homelessness, family services, the overdose crisis and disability rights. In this work I focus mostly on research, rules, policies, laws and systems. The issues I work on every day in all areas of my work intersect with homelessness and therefor, the complexity of the issue can be staggering.

We would recommend that the Senate keep the House language that continues to keep Vermonter's sheltered through June 30th. One of the many things that Act 81 did was give providers some breathing room to come to agreement on priorities. We have all been working very hard to ensure that, and have been meeting and working to put together a plan that would adequately shelter people using a suite of options. I was heartened to hear that the appropriation that it would take to revert to house language was a small addition to what the Senate has already appropriated. I think given that information, keeping people sheltered is the only right thing to do. Deputy Commissioner Gray testified that the amount needed would be 3.1 million more than the Governor's proposed budget of 8.2 Million. The Senate left 10.7 million in the appropriation. If you bring that number up to 11.3 million, then all vulnerable Vermonters are protected. Given this budgetary information and the catastrophic crisis for individuals, providers and communities that will occur if 1000 plus households are exited to the streets on March 15th, including the financial strain on our emergency systems, this seems like not only the right thing to do, but, the fiscally responsible thing to do.

The Budget Adjustment Act that this committee passed out on 2/6/2024 will un-shelter nearly 1000 households, which includes people in all the same vulnerable categories protected by the cohort. House Human Services took testimony beyond the administration, both from lived experience experts and from providers. That is how they came to the conclusion that it is time to end categories. For the purpose of the BAA though, we are talking about a mass onslaught, bigger than the number of individuals exited on June 1st into our communities. This will include, children, people with medical vulnerabilities (not captured by regular GA), people with disabilities as defined by the American With Disabilities Act, veterans, people who were victims of flood, fire, no cause eviction, skyrocketing rents and more.

I was very disappointed to hear once again that there is a belief in assurances and words of an administration that keeps misleading the committee. In almost all instances regarding housing and homelessness outcomes have born out just as advocates have warned they would. I would think by now, it would be understood. It would make sense and be appropriate to hear from providers, people with lived experience and advocates whom all have to live day to day in our very challenging work with whatever decision you make.

As heard in testimony from Deputy Commissioner Grayh, most people included in Adverse Weather Conditions meet categorical eligibility. There is only a negligible fraction of people who do not meet those criteria. However, when you create those criteria, the work that goes into just one person staying sheltered can be anywhere from 3 hours to 50 hours on a single individual for multiple providers.

HHAV is made up of about 60 providers and housers. We as a group have come together as the experts in the field and agreed on a set of priorities. These include keeping people experiencing homelessness sheltered.

I heard again today that there is a belief among committee members that the administration would not put people who are vulnerable outside. Here are just a few examples of who we saw exited to the street by this administration since the policy choice was made to Un-Shelter nearly 1000 people on June 1st:

- On 2/6/2024, I supported a person with schizophrenia to receive shelter. This individual needed an exception to stay in a hotel NOT because there were not enough rooms, but, because the state made a choice to limit rooms. This is happening in a lot of hotels across the state. The capacity issue is a myth. He would be exited on March 15th.
- In the last couple of weeks, I helped a person who was a recent amputee in a wheelchair. It took me weeks to get him sheltered, because the administration had closed a hotel that had a wheelchair accessible room to new families. Again, this is not a capacity issue, it is manufactured
- This fall, I had to wait weeks and ask for an exception because the administration had exited a veteran with an amputated foot who is in a wheelchair
- I had a mom with 3 kids exited this past fall, they slept outside
- A family with a 1 year old was exited outside and they slept outside
- A family with twin children with severe respiratory problems were exited in the fall to the streets
- A woman who had just had a heart attack
- A man who was being discharged from the hospital after open heart surgery
- 3 different people with pulmonary embolisms
- A man who was exited from the cohort, in a wheelchair with severe health problems
- A woman pregnant but not in her third trimester

End Homelessness Vermont has been embarking on a research of the population experiencing homelessness. Here are some highlights from the data that we have gathered. We are still in this process and it will likely be a little while longer before we will release our preliminary findings. But at this stage, here are some highlights of what we have found.

- 46.8% of the people we interviewed so far were not part of the April Cohort.
- 40.1% Were part of the April Cohort.

Others were not sure at the time of the interview or had recently been exited and were waiting for results from a fair hearing.

- 76.4% of the people we interviewed had physical health conditions and those ranged from High Blood Pressure, to asthma, heart disease, cancer, recent amputees and more.
- 87.1% had some form of disability.
- 28.4% of the people we interviewed had diagnosed bi-polar.  
5.3% are living with schizophrenia.  
67.4% have experienced trauma.  
31.1% had experienced past suicide attempts.
- The majority of those categories and physical health challenges did not also have ssi or ssdi. Sometimes due to lack of support, but often due to a desire to continue to work.
- 13.1% were fleeing domestic violence.  
48.1% were victims of past domestic violence.  
However 60.5% did not know who the designated agency was for domestic violence.
- 27.7% had been in foster care as children.  
25.1% had first experienced homelessness as a child.  
And only 5% overlapped in those two categories.

When our data is complete or at a place where we can release our findings overall, I will provide our findings to this committee.

Vermont has the 2nd highest rate of homelessness in the state. We have one of the lowest vacancy rates. It is the job of our leaders to address emergencies. This is not creating policy in the BAA, it is responding to an ongoing emergency. The impact on providers, individuals and communities if this body makes the policy choice to un-shelter roughly 1000 families and 1600 individuals to the streets will be gigantic. Providers are already drowning, that choice will sink the people we rely on to do the work. Economic Service workers become buried in calls when you choose to unshelter people. We are in a housing emergency that is not the fault of people who are victims of it and I urgently ask this body to revert to the house language to keep people sheltered through June 30th and until policy decisions are made in FY25.

Thank you for your time,  
Brenda Siegel  
Executive Director  
End Homelessness Vermont