

Testimony for the Senate Economic Development Committee
Presented January 11, 2023

My name is Rose Friedman and I am the Executive Director of the Civic Standard, an organization based in Hardwick. I am honored to be invited to speak with you today, along with the Community Director of the Civic Standard, Tara Reese.

Tara and I are here to share what we learned before, during and after the flooding events of this past summer and how our organization was uniquely positioned to respond to and address our community's needs in such a challenging time, as well as how the legislature can support initiatives like ours to better serve all Vermonters.

The Civic Standard is a unique combination of cultural organization and community center located on Hardwick's Main Street. We exist to give the people of Hardwick and its surrounding towns excuses to get together - not just for fun, but to grow social capital across cultural divides. The mission is simple but also quite complicated: we live in a world (and town) that is increasingly riven by divisiveness around political affiliations, class, race, gender, and mutual misconceptions. We seek to address these misunderstandings through our programs as well as head on through individual conversations. This is a long-term ongoing effort of relationship building, mutual aid, art and theater making, conversation, and celebration.

Civic Standard programs include community suppers, theater productions, music classes, stitcher's circles, first and last day of school celebrations, prom dress swap, townwide Yankee swap, karaoke, haiku club, trivia night, honky tonk dances, and much more. They're held at various locations in partnership with local businesses and community members such as the Village Restaurant, the American Legion, Hardwick's outdoor spaces, and others. The vast majority are free or pay-what-you-want, and the events are always warmly inviting and collaboratively created. By using different venues and offering multiple avenues through which people can engage with lowered financial barriers to participation, we started to see the diverse membership of our community come together and share collective experiences in ways we never had before.

Over time, our open door on Main Street has become both a symbol of our work and a literal door that people walk through every day to sit and chat about their memories of growing up in town, introduce themselves as newcomers, ask for help, attend a meal, a rehearsal, or a music gathering, volunteer to decorate cupcakes or clean the windows, or meet with us and each other to plan an event or discuss an issue.

Then came the floods. We did not initially consider that the Civic Standard's mission would include supplying aid in the case of a natural disaster. However, it is in our mission to listen and respond, to reflect the community back on itself, and to collaborate with individuals and organizations of all kinds. So, when the rain began in July, it was obvious that we would respond in whatever way we understood to be helpful and necessary for our town.

The night of the flood, Hardwick Town Manager David Upson, known locally as Opie, reached out to ask for help in setting up a shelter at Hazen Union High School. We had worked with the town already on several events, and regularly checked in regarding individuals in the community in need of support, challenges at the school, and other collaborative efforts. Opie knew we had a robust mailing list of volunteers and

supporters. At this point, we were known, we were trusted, we could be nimble and quick. We put the call out for volunteers, and Tara, alongside several others, spent the night taking in and supporting the 30 or so displaced travelers and locals dealing with precarious home situations.

But our aid efforts didn't stop there. In fact, it was just the beginning. The days and weeks that followed included preparing, serving, and delivering many free meals to affected households as well as to the volunteers working to clean up those homes. We organized and coordinated groups to muck out basements, remove drywall, and haul out debris. We received and distributed funds, materials, and offers of help that came from just down the road and across the country. There was the task of finding out who needed help and what kind of help each person would be comfortable accepting, finding the volunteers willing to pitch in, collecting the tools and supplies needed, scheduling site work, and connecting those affected with the additional emerging systems and supports such as FEMA, the Red Cross, and other aid groups. Each of these steps involved significant amounts of individualized connection, trust, and respect.

The Civic Standard is a cultural organization. Yes, culture includes theater, art, food, and language, but it also includes the way we respond in an emergency, and the human systems that repair and aid when there is a tear in the fabric of our communities. As cultural workers and deeply invested community members, we were able to move quickly and give it our all, but we also recognized and valued moving at the speed of trust, that is to say, not ignoring or brushing past the complex and varied nuances and considerations of each interaction.

Throughout all of this, we have come to understand that we are in a unique position to be helpful – not just to organize and call in lots of volunteers, but also to communicate with those who might otherwise be or have historically been distrustful of aid. Our work as artists makes it easy for us to pivot and respond creatively. Our individualized, ongoing organizing in the community made the transition to relief work feel natural. We understood what was needed and who needed it without burdensome paperwork or red tape that can intimidate those in need.

We also saw first-hand what we have known for a long time to be true: there are many people in our community living very close to the edge. A disaster, whether natural and community-wide, or personal and seemingly minor, can break an already tenuous situation, leading to devastation, hopelessness, and substantial loss. So, as we did the work of “flood relief”, we recognized that the lines were blurry from the very beginning, and that any and all aid could and should apply to helping others.

For example, someone whose house was damaged also needed a new car battery. The battery wasn't damaged as a result of the flooding, but the cost of replacement was an additional burden to bear.

A young pregnant woman needed some basement mucking, and we quickly learned that her house was already severely compromised by black mold and had structural integrity issues well before the July events.

A family needed to move its trailer off of a collapsing riverbank, but the elderly father did not feel safe to leave his home, even temporarily. His caretaker daughter was

overwhelmed with finding her way through the process while continuing to work to support the family.

We navigated each of these unique situations using all of our resources: funds donated through our nonprofit, volunteers, pre-established relationships with town officials and local organizations, and our own particular creativity, determination, and social capital. If the call for help is there, should we really be adjusting our support by differentiating between causes?

Meanwhile, our response efforts did not eclipse our intent to gather for fun and connection. In the midst of our around-the-clock effort to respond and organize during and after the flood, we continued to hold play rehearsals, old-time gatherings, karaoke nights, and more. In fact, it was during the acute flood response time that we added our weekly free supper to the calendar, which continues to foster some of the richest, most organic introductions, conversations, and ideas among our community members.

And in our own unique way, we fold the shared experiences of Hardwickians into our creative work. In September we remounted our original dinner theater production “Developed To Death”, which was an entertaining examination of development, rural gentrification and class. In the post-flood version a developer tries to make a fast buck off of a town emotionally and physically devastated by the flood. Needless to say, the developer was the victim in the murder mystery. And in October we presented “Garage of Doom”, a haunted house experience, in which the audience was invited to view a fictitious mysterious object that appeared in the eroded banks of the Lamoille river after the flood. As they examined it, a portal into a parallel Hardwick opened. Hundreds of locals attended these productions, saw themselves and each other in them, and participated in a shared experience of hilarity, catharsis, and imagination beyond our daily reality.

These events– from weekly suppers to grand theatrical projects– are not directly connected to disaster relief, but they are integral to it, as they prepare us for the next round. We all know each other better because of them, and therefore we better know the needs of the community as a whole and the individuals within.

There is no shortcut to this work. Relationship-building is, by its nature, not efficient or able to be streamlined. We need to be there in the good times in order to be effective in the hard times.

So, I am here today to say this: if we want Vermonters and our organizations to be less vulnerable, better able to help our communities in need, and more prepared and resilient for the future, then we need state financial resources and support to grow our capacity. These resources need to have minimal administrative burden and operate from a trust-based philanthropy model that allows organizations like ours to spend the money in ways that will meet the specific, varying, and diverse identified needs. We do not need a study to measure the effectiveness of this approach: the Civic Standard is proof of what can be achieved, and we encourage action heading into the next budget cycle.

Collectively, we need more collaboration, communication, accountability, and transparency between municipal government, state and federal agencies, and cultural organizations like ours. It is imperative to meet each other as *people*, and build *trust* on a human scale, all of which takes time, but can have long-lasting and profound impact.

Our ongoing practice of community building is not only helpful in an emergency, it is essential in order to survive the catastrophes and challenges of our time. We are requesting your support on a state level in order to continue to do the work of repairing the fabric of our small communities, while also weaving more and more of us into it.

Thank you for listening, and for considering our request.