

Testimony of Jeff Moreau on behalf of the Vermont Alliance for Recovery Residences and Recovery Partners of Vermont

I am grateful for the opportunity to address you today. My name is Jeff Moreau and I am the Founding Executive Director of the Vermont Alliance for Recovery Residences (VTARR).

Today, I am accompanied by my dear friend Sarah Mekos. Sarah is a person in longterm recovery who has significant experience with recovery residences. I know that you will find her testimony helpful in better understanding the tremendous impact that these residences have on the lives of the people we serve.

We are here today to ask for your support of H.639, which includes a legislative solution to Vermont's landlord-tenant law that provides for the safety and successful recovery of all residents in Vermont's certified Recovery Residences. Section 8 (a) of H. 639 does just that.

Recovery residences offer peer support, but also provide essential elements necessary for individuals to achieve sustained, long-term recovery. Recovery housing differs from treatment centers, medical facilities, or group homes. Rather, residences emphasize structure, accountability, employment, and community service, creating an environment free from alcohol and illicit drug use. Residents live together as a family, sharing meals, household chores, and activities, thereby nurturing a supportive community for one another. Vermont's recovery residences do not provide medical or clinical treatment services.

Prior to 2019, Vermont lacked any form of oversight or encouragement of best practices for recovery residences. In response, Recovery Partners of Vermont, Vermont Foundation of Recovery, and community stakeholders collaborated to establish a voluntary certification system based on the National Alliance for Recovery Residences. The coalition's primary objective was to embrace national standards and best practices and draw attention to the critical need for these recovery resources. VTARR emerged from this initiative, and I am immensely proud of the diligence exhibited by the 13 certified recovery residences across the State, including well known residences such as Jenna's Promise and Second Wind Foundation.

It is also important to understand that recovery residences are transitional housing in nature. Most tenants stay for 3-6 months and sign membership agreements upon entry, including the promise to stay sober. This commitment is essential for the safety and recovery of all tenants within the home. In Vermont, operators are not always able to remove an individual if they break this component of their membership agreement, which can have devastating consequences for the rest of the tenants who rely on a sober environment to break free from their addiction.

Maine recently enacted legislation allowing recovery residences to exit an individual if the residence is certified and has an approved discharge policy. I want to emphasize that the use of this practice is limited in scope and is only intended for individuals who are posing a direct threat to the safety and sobriety of others.

I would like to set the record straight. No certified recovery residence kicks a resident out to the streets. Each residence is already required to work with the individual on a person-centered relapse plan that documents where he or she wishes to go during a recurrence of their disease. Let me share with you how Vermont Foundation of Recovery handles these situations, which mirrors practices of Jenna's Promise and the Second Wind Foundation.

Potential members are asked as part of the application process to list a safe place they can go to in the event they need to exit the home. We touch on this during the interview and again during the orientation process. We also have emergency locations in Essex and Barre that we provide in the event someone doesn't have a safe place to go. In addition, we provide transportation and have staff stay with the person until they are stabilized. If for some reason the emergency locations are not available, we purchase a hotel room and pay for staff to stay with them until they can return to the house or identify another location to transition to.

I'd like to speak to the critical role recovery residences play in the overall system of care for those suffering with a substance addiction. Firstly, Vermont's residential treatment system typically offers only two weeks of care, after which individuals are encouraged to seek follow-up care within the community. Recovery residences provide a crucial opportunity for individuals to continue their recovery journey in a supportive, sober environment designed to create sustained recovery.

Secondly, Vermont has been lauded for its hub and spoke system, providing medically assisted treatment. However, sending individuals back to the environments that may have contributed to their substance use disorder is counterproductive. So often these environments are unhealthy and include trauma, substance use, and poor influences. Recovery residences offer a continuum of care solution by providing a supportive environment conducive to building recovery capital.

Despite these benefits, the availability of recovery residences remains limited in Vermont. The Downstreet Housing Report, *Housing: A Critical Link to Recovery* provides an Assessment of the need for recovery residences in Vermont and highlights that only about 2% of Vermont's population in need of such support actually receives it.

Prior to the pandemic, Vermont was making progress in addressing this issue. However, we have since experienced the closure of a number of programs, losing a dozen certified homes. Presently, we have only 13 certified locations, a stark contrast to New Hampshire's 100+ certified residences.

Vermont desperately needs more recovery residences, and both existing and potential operators cite challenges with Vermont's landlord-tenant law as a primary reason why they are not pursuing new residences in Vermont. This issue is a direct barrier to scaling recovery residences in Vermont.

This is because the current application of the law directly challenges an operator's obligation to provide for the safety and sobriety of all tenants. Specifically, how to effectively ensure safety when an individual relapses or engages in behaviors that jeopardize the recovery and well-being of others in the household.

Moreover, our certified residences are operating at near full capacity, leading to lengthy waitlists that undermine the success of those seeking sober living arrangements. There is also a pressing need to expand geographically to better serve communities across the state. With your support in enacting this legislation, we are confident in our ability to double the capacity of certified homes and enhance the support available to individuals on their path to recovery.

Thank you once again for your attention and proactive efforts in addressing these critical issues.

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jeff Moreau', is placed on a light gray rectangular background.

Jeff Moreau, Executive Director
Vermont Alliance for
Recovery Residences (VTARR)