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To: Senator Kesha Ram Hinsdale, Chair, and members of Senate Economic Development, Housing & General Affairs Committee and House Committee on General & Housing Committee
From: Rebecca Plummer, Vermont Legal Aid, Inc.
Re: Testimony at Public Hearing on Housing
Date: February 16, 2023

Good evening, my name is Rebecca Plummer. I'm an attorney at Vermont Legal Aid, and the director of our Medical-Legal Partnership Project. At Vermont Legal Aid and our sister organization, Legal Services Vermont, we work with people who are being hit hardest by Vermont's housing crisis – including people going through eviction and people experiencing homelessness. I have worked most closely in recent years through a partnership with clinics providing medication assisted treatment to people with substance use disorder. These are people who are trying to turn their lives around and need, more than ever, a stable place to live, but are often very precariously housed or experiencing homelessness.

During the pandemic, Vermont has received critical federal assistance to shelter people experiencing homelessness and avoid an even greater public health crisis, but as we all know, that money is drying up. At the same time, the housing crisis has exploded. There is simply no housing to be found. Vermont led the way in keeping people experiencing homelessness safe during the pandemic. We've done it reactively, but we've seen how important it is and how it helps all of us, and we have a chance to plan and do this better. We cannot return to unsheltered homelessness. We at Vermont Legal Aid believe that housing is a human right.

The Legislature is working, through the Budget Adjustment Act, on ways to address the impending cliff next month for people who are sheltered in motels. We appreciate this work, and we urge the Legislature to protect as many people as possible through this fix and not let people fall through the cracks.

We at Vermont Legal Aid strongly support the Bridges to Housing proposal for the future of emergency housing in Vermont, that was put forth by numerous housing and homelessness advocacy organizations. That proposal includes creating alternatives to motel-based shelter; investing in affordable housing and in services to support people who need help to remain housed and live independently; fully funding and re-envisioning the GA emergency housing program; and increasing planning and coordination to end homelessness. We believe that all of these are essential to bringing Vermont through this housing crisis. We also strongly support a rent rescue program and other measures to prevent evictions that, in a housing market with no vacancies, are a direct vector of homelessness.

I want to focus for a moment on the proposal to fully fund and re-envision the GA emergency housing program. This administration has repeatedly expressed a desire to end the GA program and has not put forth a plan for emergency housing beyond the federal funding we have now. As

we work with people who are experiencing homelessness and in danger of becoming homeless, we feel a shocking disconnect here. Yes, investing in housing is essential and urgently needed. But we cannot pretend that this will happen quickly or that it will end homelessness completely. We will continue to have people who need emergency housing because of eviction, loss of a job, domestic violence, addiction, fire or flood or condemnation of a building, lead paint or mold or rodent infestation, lack of heat or water. And we need a robust, humane emergency housing program for our neighbors who find themselves in these situations – a program that protects them when they need a safe place to stay and helps them to find new permanent housing as soon as possible.

Thank you very much for your time and your work for Vermonters.