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**Testimony of Sue Minter
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Before the Senate Government Operations Committee**

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Introduction

Thank you for allowing me to testify remotely and for the opportunity to comment on the proposed legislation to help our state focus on Community Resilience both as we recover from the current disaster and prepare for those ahead.

For the record I am Sue Minter, Executive Director of Capstone Community Action, a community-based anti-poverty non-profit established in 1965 serving Washington, Lamoille and Orange Counties. Capstone and is one of five (5) Community Action Agencies in Vermont that make up the Vermont Community Action Agency Partnership (VCAP). Collectively, our mission is to end poverty by providing crisis services – food, housing and heat through the winter – and providing tools and opportunities to help lift people out of poverty into economic self-sufficiency.

For the purpose of this testimony, it is also relevant that I served as Vermont’s Irene Recovery Officer in 2011 and represented Vermont on the Obama White House Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience in 2013. These experiences influence my understanding of the urgent need for better planning and investment to ensure our state recovers from this disaster with resilience and so that communities can be better prepared for the increased risks to public safety given our changing climate.

Vermont began focusing on resilience in our recovery from Irene. From the day after the storm hit, the clear state mission was to “build back stronger” and recover with resilience to the threats of more frequent and extreme rain events. The state embraced significant innovation and recognition of the need to think differently about our future, and to fully grasp the need to “let nature take its course”. State resilience efforts recovering from Irene – which had more significant impact to our state and local transportation infrastructure than did July 2023 flooding – focused primarily on building larger bridges and culverts, smarter roads, and ditches,

and overall strategies to allow rivers to meander to reduce velocity, and significantly, restoring and creating flood plains so that the river would flood in less destructive ways. There are many important examples of where our resilient recovery from Irene has had a significant positive impact on protecting roads, homes, businesses, and communities from extreme damage following the July floods, followed by December flooding. Obviously, we have not done nearly enough. Given the devastation and destruction of July's flood, we need to dig deeper, continue to innovate, expand our investment and commitment to recovering with even greater resilience.

While a focus on transportation and ecosystem resilience was a focus of my work in Irene recovery, my work following the July 2023 floods has primarily been focused on people, and vulnerable Vermonters -- those who are of low income, from marginalized populations, or are elderly or living with disabilities. These folks are really a subset of the larger community and often have needs that are not well understood or are overlooked. But it is critical to realize that it is the most vulnerable who face disproportionate risk from climate disaster, who have been the hardest hit in this disaster and who now face the greatest barriers to recovery. I believe strongly that the needs of the most vulnerable must be front and center in how we recover now and plan for a resilient future.

Flood Response

Capstone's work for flood response began the day after the July flooding occurred. We were one of the many non-profits on the ground, pivoting to respond to the crisis of the moment. Despite being flooded out of our Barre headquarters, our team immediately went into emergency response mode -- providing emergency food, prepared meals, water, baby formula, and volunteers throughout our service territory for many weeks. We assembled volunteer brigades for several weekends, mucking out homes, providing critical resources and support in the hardest hit neighborhoods. Throughout the summer our front-line staff partnered with state and other community organization at state recovery centers, provided direct support for folks applying for FEMA or the SBA, registering for 211, and helped flood survivors navigate through the myriad of needs for housing and basic supplies.

Capstone also helped lead the Main Street Flood Recovery fund in the first weeks and months post flood, helping to quickly raise and administer over \$800,000 in immediate direct assistance (through small grants) to businesses across the state. Capstone has also been able to provide the support for the Vermont Energy Recovery Team (VERT) by receiving and administering philanthropic funds to make sure utilities are paid for their project management time assisting survivors with acute heating needs.

Flood Recovery Efforts – Need for Greater Resilience

Capstone is now working with the state to stand up a statewide Disaster Case Management Program, to implement a FEMA grant for long term recovery and individual case management. Collaborating with our Community Action partners, this program will be offering direct case management to flood survivors across the state, under the FEMA program guidelines and in partnership with the State. This program has currently hired the first six (6) out of an eventual team of fifteen (15) to help with Long Term Recovery for individuals.

I am submitting with my testimony extensive information from FEMA which documents the number and demographics of Vermonters who have registered with FEMA Individual Assistance. I encourage you to peruse these documents to understand the magnitude of this event and its effect on people. We know that there are a total of 6338 “valid” registrants, 2,343 (37%) are in Central Vermont and 1,114 (nearly 18%) are “low”, “very low” or “extremely low” income Vermonters. What we do not know is the state of their recovery; nor do we know about people who did not register with FEMA.

Some Vermonters are still suffering from extreme conditions. Many are either displaced or still living in substandard or even unsafe conditions. They live with mold, they live with cold, and they live without everything they had before the disaster. They live with the ongoing trauma of the flood and a sense of hopelessness and despair.

Thankfully, there are still hundreds of volunteers across the state who are continuing, valiantly, to work to help with recovery needs. There are currently nine community-based recovery organizations that FEMA has called “Long Term Recovery Groups” have formed throughout the state. Included in my Testimony is a FEMA map of the LTRGs. These LTRGs are community-based organizations working to follow FEMA’s guidelines to become independent nonprofits, with bylaws and fiscal agents to receive potential grants. Each LTRG, being run primarily by volunteers, has its own difficult story of standing up an organization and generally feeling frustrated, burned out and left behind.

I emphasize this challenge because, in many ways, it points to a failure in our preparedness for future disasters that we need to recognize and plan differently for the future. We know now that severe weather disasters from climate change in Vermont and elsewhere will be more frequent and more intense. Local governments face enormous challenges trying to manage a well-organized response to emergencies at the scale of what we experienced in July or in 2011. We need to take stock of what has happened, and is still unfolding, to learn lessons and become better prepared for what is ahead.

Vermont’s municipalities cannot be expected to respond and recover without better training, plans and support from the state as well as in partnership with FEMA and established connections to locally based organizations. During a disaster response, local municipalities are expected to mobilize emergency response teams, assess damage, plan recovery, and meet urgent humanitarian needs among disaster survivors. This is simply not possible. Local leaders are expected to effectively manage complex federal programs, each with different rules and

eligibility requirements and processes. They need support from the state and federal agencies. They need better training in advance of a disaster and they need help from local partners in the community that can be pre-positioned and quickly funded to provide the critical support that is needed.

I encourage you to hear testimony from these LTRGs to better understand what is happening right now in our most impacted communities. As the leaders of the DCMP, Capstone is trying to support and work with the LTRGs, but they are understandably incredibly frustrated as we are now seven months out from the disaster and only just getting started with a long-term case management program.

The problem we face today supporting flood survivors points to a missing part of our recovery and resilience planning – individual recovery. Our resilience policies and the proposed statutory changes and vision for emergency planning are all very important, but in my view do not fully address the immediate response and recovery needs of individuals. This bill, and others working to address “resilience” are focused primarily on FEMA’s Public Assistance and Hazard Mitigation programs. While this is extremely important at the community level, it leaves out a critical component of individuals who are struggling to recover. And in our work to improve our preparedness for recovery, we MUST incorporate plans that better understand the challenges individuals in our communities are currently facing, along with the needs for individual recovery plans and programs at the state, where there are currently gaps at the federal level, and lack of capacity at the local level.

To all the important ideas presented in the proposed bill, I will add the need for pre-disaster training, organizational capacity at the state and local level, as well as the need for immediate funding for local staffing for response and recovery. I recommend these elements be added to Part 7 of the bill (Sections 14-16).

Currently there is one person in AHS in charge of individual recovery. This is simply inadequate and unsustainable. A more robust system is needed to address the scale of disruption and humanitarian distress. As we look to the future we must acknowledge the growing needs in this area. The state AHS and VEM should work with regional and municipal entities to:

- Enhance and expand local emergency management training and preparedness.
- Expand and enhance the emergency shelter programs statewide, including finding more accessible locations.
- Develop and support an emergency feeding program (based on what has developed post pandemic).
- Designate and train local nonprofits to be available to stand up as the emergency response and recovery organization for individual disaster recovery.
- Designate and train state personnel to become temporary “bridge case managers” to ensure the individual support begins immediately following disaster and not waiting until FEMA programs are funded and underway

- Non-profits need to be able to have funding available, immediately, to take on this work and cannot rely solely on volunteers;
- Support the efficient development of Long Term Recovery Committees through a centralized and singular fiscal agent for all LTRGs to ensure that private funding can be secured, administered, and reported with no delay.
- Designate a lead that coordinates information flow and resource needs assessments for all LTRGs.

I hope we will take stock of the lessons learned about supporting people through disaster. Community Resilience and emergency preparedness must include better planning and coordination for flood survivors from the arrival of the emergency, through their recovery. This includes the need to better plan for sheltering, feeding and transporting people during a disaster, and resilience must include supporting individuals and communities through their long term recovery.

Communities need leadership and they need vision. They need HOPE that there is a bright future ahead, one that can be safe from impending climate disasters, and one they and their children can believe in.

Thank you for the work you are doing to provide direction and hope for the future.