

I am Mary Cohen, Executive Director of the Housing Trust of Rutland County. I truly appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today.

The HTRC is an affordable housing organization that has been in existence for a little over 30 years. We own and manage just under 400 affordable housing units- about 340 multifamily and 50 or so mobile home sites. We are currently navigating a potential merger with Neighborworks of Western Vermont –a Neighborworks America affiliate and together we believe we can serve our communities in a more impactful way.

We have an active project development pipeline – which is critical to helping address the current housing crisis but also important for the long game of affordability and preventing homelessness. We are hoping to break ground on a 24 unit project in West Rutland - Marble Village- in April, a 35 unit project in Rutland City East Creek Commons that includes 9 rehabbed family units, 22 new units as well as 4 new units in Castleton designated specifically for the VASH program for homeless veterans. We are also looking at a 30 unit project on Forest Street in Rutland City for next fall. If the funding is available, that will bring 89 units to the Rutland Region. We cannot build them fast enough.

I want to tell you briefly about a VHCB funded project that has been a real success. Lincoln Place, an old vacant elementary school, was transformed into 19 permanently affordable units close to downtown Rutland. When this project came online in

November of 2021, 10 units were designated for those experiencing homelessness. We agreed to this high concentration of those experiencing homelessness because we have key partners in Rutland Mental Health, who has committed to 20 hours onsite, the Homeless Prevention Center who provides the coordinated entry system and significant case management and the Rutland Housing Authority who has provided rental subsidies so that no one has to pay more than 30% of their income. In our initial lease up, we housed 14 of the 19 to those experiencing homelessness – many who came out of the hotels. And this is not only about getting people into units, it is about housing stability, sustainability and permanent affordability. I definitely call this project a success – but I can tell you it is hard work every day. The high needs of the individuals at Lincoln Place require all of our partners to be on board every day. This is a model to be scrutinized as the need for supportive services continues.

The need for these permanently affordable units is great. Our project at East Creek Commons, had a market study done where it was determined that before the end of 2024, there will be a need for 2,700 affordable units in Rutland County alone. 2,700....the need is not going away and without these units, some may, in fact become homeless.

I want to share some experiences our staff has had and a few challenges we face as we increase our concentration of residents coming out of homelessness and particularly from the

hotels. Unlike Lincoln Place, with formal partnerships in place, we tend to scatter site our residents with the highest needs. Our portfolio currently houses about 34% who have come out of homelessness. In August alone, we leased up 11 units and 7 were from people currently living in hotels. There are many who do not have basic life skills – how to budget and pay rent on time, how to keep space clean and healthy, or how to be a good neighbor. We rely on support services to help us maneuver some of these issues but oftentimes our partnering organizations are short staffed or have high caseload numbers making it difficult to serve all members – leaving our staff to address health and safety issues, mental health crisis and substance abuse disorders. For the first time, and with the help of the Bowse Health Trust through the Rutland regional medical center, we have been able to hire a resident services coordinator. I feel like we could triple this role and probably not have enough support...

I think it is important to look at the homeless population holistically and for sustainability. We are thankful for the support and funding for our affordable housing projects – the need is not going away. 2,700 in Rutland County alone before the end of next year. It is imperative we continue this work to avoid homelessness for our friends and neighbors. We are thankful to VHCB who continues to advocate and support the work that we do.

Keeping a requirement of 30 % of our portfolio for those exiting homelessness will be difficult to sustain. Right now it's a necessity and we understand the crisis at hand. And we need help. We need supportive services to be at the table with us to help address the high needs individuals, many of whom are finding themselves in this position because of the pandemic. There is a considerable toll on our portfolio as we are seeing turnover costs double and as a result vacancy rates high as the time to turn these units also increases. The unintended consequences of the VERAP program and residents "out of the habit of paying rent" have taken a toll on our portfolio performance. Rent receivables is high, evictions and turnover costs have at least doubled and the time units are vacant has increased – all while the need for units to be online is huge.

Without us all working together, new affordable multifamily rental units in conjunction with coordinated supportive services, the homeless population will not decrease. I see the need absolutely for new units – which will actually help prevent homelessness – but also for the support services to increase the likelihood of sustainable tenancy and a decrease in prolonged homelessness.