

**Senate Committee on Health and Welfare**  
**Developmental Disabilities Housing Initiative – January 31, 2024 at 11:50 AM**  
*Bennett & Jenn Townley*

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you today. I'm Jenn Townley, and have been a member of the Developmental Disabilities Housing Initiative since its formation in 2021. We are a parent run advocacy group of over 100 parents of adults who have an intellectual and/or developmental disability diagnosis, who qualify for Medicaid Home and Community Based Services waiver and have significant support needs whether medical, emotional, physical, health and safety, etc. Our I/DD community desperately needs the development of housing options that addresses the range of our sons/daughters needs and provides choices in service-supported housing. I would like to thank you for your prior support in the passage of Act 186 in 2022, which yielded 3 pilot planning grants. I am currently serving on the project team for one of those planning grants awarded to The Champlain Housing Trust in Chittenden County. I am here today with my son, Bennett, who would also like to share his desires for stable, permanent, service-supported housing to meet his needs.

Vermont's State System of Care Plan for Developmental Services Division estimates that 2.5% of the Vermont population have an intellectual or developmental disability. Vermont Care Partners estimates that 9% of individuals who have IDD are either homeless or at risk of homelessness. There are many adults with developmental disabilities living with their aging parents who are seeking a permanent service-supported housing option for them to call home in a community where they grew up and where the community knows them and meets their need when their parents can no longer care for them. For families like mine, there are restless nights and worry wondering who will care for our children when we are gone, to meet their needs and provide them with a happy and meaningful life. I'm sure many of you have faced a similar dilemma of finding appropriate housing and services for aging parents when the role of caregiving becomes too much. The pandemic has taken a toll on many agencies and systems, and families are bearing the load of providing the caregiving and supports for their children with IDD.

*Hi, My name is Bennett Gica Townley. I am 26 years old on Monday and have lived in Williston since coming to America in 2001 from Romania. As an individual with unique abilities, I would like to advocate why peer, permanent, service supported affordable housing in Vermont is important to me and my uniquely-abled friends.*

*I made friends during my time in Williston elementary and middle schools as well as peers from surrounding towns when I attended CVU High School. Many of us participate in Special Olympics events as well. In the photos being passed around, I can tell you that I still ski every Winter Games season with Vermont Adaptive on Sundays with my friends in the photo from 2008. I want to continue to live in the community where my friends and I grew up in as many people know us and will help us if we need it. Most importantly, I feel safer in Williston, than I would in other places in Chittenden County. Alas, my friends and I want to have choices about where we live, who we live with, and how we want to live. We would like*

*stable, permanent, inclusive, accessible, service supported housing in our community so we can live together.*

*We need to see affordable housing soon, since many of us are living with aging parents, including my friends and I, and we can't afford regular housing on our own. None of us can drive currently due to various medical and/or behavioral challenges, so we would want to live in a part of our community that is walkable or near public transportation and have amenities and work close by, yet is still safe. I also want to live close to nature as quiet walks help me regulate and help me with my anxiety.*

*We ask you to please help fund our housing and service providers so Vermont can offer permanent affordable housing for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities on behalf of my friends and I to live in since that would make us feel more competent in ourselves. We are now at the age where we want to have a place to call home that is not our folks' place or a group home and experience the same freedoms other people our age do but with support and a safety net.*

*Thank you for your time to hear my advocacy.*

Since the closing of Brandon 30+ years ago, there has been little money invested by the State in service-supported housing for adults with developmental disabilities. The 1999 Olmstead Act directed states to develop a fiscal plan to include housing for people with developmental disabilities in their state budgets, yet unfortunately 25 years have passed and there are no targets in Vermont. The State of Vermont has failed to meet their obligations under Federal Medicaid Rules and is currently under two corrective action plans to demonstrate that HCBS waiver recipients like my son, Bennett, have true choice, including choices of housing.

It's exciting to know that the three Act 186 pilot planning grants should be completed by October of this year and ready for development. One thing that will support the sustainability of this type of housing model for our family members is that they have home and community based services provided through Medicaid to support them, as well as access to entitlement benefits like Social Security to help fund their rent. I'm here today to ask for legislative support to help fund the Act 186 pilot planning grant projects and make them a reality. In addition, we are interested in the establishment of a set aside % to create a pipeline of funding to develop service-supported housing for my son and other adults with I/DD annually, so we can close the gap on the 602 units needed immediately as outlined in last year's *VDDC Housing Brief* from Act 186. But even more important is that my adult son, Bennett, and others in this vulnerable population, are provided with choices in where, with who, and how they want to live just like each of us in this room have had the opportunity to decide where and with whom to live with once we reached adulthood. I believe Vermont can do better and it will require a collaborative effort between housing partners and service providers to secure and provide the service-supported housing needs of Vermont adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Thank you.