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Testimony to Senate Committee Health and Welfare

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My name is Max Barrows. I live in Worcester, Vermont. I am Autistic and I get Developmental Disability Services. I work for Green Mountain Self-Advocates.

Green Mountain Self-Advocates includes more than 600 members who are people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We come from different religions, races, genders, and sexual orientations. When we advocate for equal access, rights, and opportunities, we are speaking up on behalf of our **whole** community. We want to make sure everyone in our community is heard and treated fairly.

Hasan and I both live with our parents right now. Hasan is 29 and I am 38. We are comfortable living with our parents, but, we know we can't stay with them forever.

Lately, there's been a lot of talk about creating new places for people with developmental disabilities to live, like "intentional communities." Today, I want to explain why Green Mountain Self-Advocates opposes "intentional communities."

We think everyone should live together, not be separated into special places just for people with developmental disabilities. It's really good to make friends with people who don't have disabilities. When we have places only for those with disabilities, it can feel like there are too many rules. Sometimes, people in charge use punishments that wouldn't be okay for anyone else. Like in my high school, there was a segregated program for students with disabilities. I remember seeing a 21-year-old student with autism having to kneel in a corner just because of something she said. That didn't seem fair.

We want to live in places where our neighbors can be our friends, no matter if they have disabilities or not.

It's not right to separate people based on disabilities, just like it wouldn't be right to do that for race or sexual orientation. Would the state of Vermont fund intentional communities just for Blacks or just for Lesbians? So why is it okay to do it for people with developmental disabilities?

Our opinions are backed by reports, like the 2023 Research Brief by the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council. The report describes how people with significant disabilities get the services they need while living in typical housing options integrated into their communities. The researchers found that "Permanent supportive housing is a model used widely by other states. It can be configured in a variety of ways, clustered or scattered, with on-site staff or not. It aligns with the CMS Settings Rule and is associated with positive outcomes like community integration and choice. As demonstrated by some of the programs reviewed in this report, with the right supports a wide range of adults, including those with significant support needs, can live in supportive housing. When clustered in a single site, permanent supportive housing projects typically cap the number of units designated for people with disabilities at 25%."

We know we don't want to live in intentional communities only for people with disabilities. We want to live in typical neighborhoods, with everyone else.

Some say people with disabilities need to live in places that are "just for us", but that is the same reason Brandon Training School got made. The old institutions kept us away from other people. They made it easier for us to get hurt and took away our freedom. People try and say these new segregated places aren't like the old institutions, but they are. They might look like every other neighborhood. But only disabled people live there.

We know that studies show we should live in the community. We also know one very important thing: that people with developmental disabilities don't want to live in segregated places. We know that we want to live in the community with everyone else.

Thank you for listening to our concerns.