

## Joint Hearing on Public Safety between Senate Economic Development, Housing, and General Affairs, Senate Health & Welfare, and Senate Judiciary.

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12 minutes

### **Introduction**

*Thank you, members of the Senate, for inviting me to testify at today's joint hearing on Public Safety. Burlington Housing Authority works very hard to fulfill our mission to provide low-income, vulnerable members of our community access to safe, affordable housing and retention support services in ways that encourage stability, improve quality of life, end homelessness, and foster vibrant neighborhoods.*

*Over the last several years, there has been a noticeable increase in the instances of drug dealing, drug use, and associated unacceptable behaviors at and around our properties and in our community. Each instance comes with a mixture of tangible, known costs and hidden, unseen costs.*

### **Effect on Residents**

*The effects on our residents, who are some of the more vulnerable members of our community, including the elderly, disabled, and those with limited communication skills, is noticeable. A number have expressed their fear, discomfort, and displeasure at having to live in a community where they do not feel safe. These communities are their homes and they should be able to feel safe in that home. Daily, they encounter drug users, drug dealers, thieves, and individuals who disrespect their home. Instance of this are seen from trash being left in hallways and stairwells, used needles being disposed of in any many unimaginable ways, human waste in common areas, and disruptive and disrespectful behaviors in shared spaces.*

*We have diligently worked with residents to solve practical problems such as package theft, but there are areas where we cannot make progress without community support, through legal and enforcement changes. We encounter a number of individuals who are not residents who traverse through common areas to visit drug dealers within our properties. These individuals will then purchase or trade for illegal drugs, then use those drugs or allow other drug users into the building. Many of these buildings have access control systems designed to limit building access, but the human element is all that is needed to bypass these controls. Residents often have to wait in common spaces where an individual is actively using drugs or has left behind human waste. Often these individuals will leave when prompted, but not clean the mess that was left behind. The frequent coming and going from the property with stolen goods and drugs shows us that this problem goes beyond a few and often focuses around one or more individuals dealing drugs.*

### **Effect on Organization**

*The staff and vendors at Burlington Housing work very hard to try to provide safe and sanitary homes to our residents. The constant need to chase individuals who are exhibiting egregious behaviors at our properties takes its toll both physically and emotionally. Our staff and vendors encounter a mixture of physical and emotional abuse from in-person conversations, emails, and phone calls.*

*We are expected to be able to handle many of the issues exhibited by non-residents when we are not equipped or empowered to do so. We are not the police, we cannot physically remove an individual from the property. We have to request the services of Burlington Police and the Chittenden County Sheriff, just like any other landlord. We have had instances where we required law enforcement due to physical threats made by residents. We are not the courts, we cannot evict a resident from the property. We have to follow and pay the same court costs as other landlords to remove a resident who is a danger to our community, which can take months (in one case 18-months). We are a provider of homes and services who tries to keep our residents in those homes to the best degree possible. It is extremely difficult to communicate and set expectations with our residents our inability to handle these issues without our City or State partners. We also bear the burden of the costs to repeatedly repair the same items (light fixtures, cleaning), add additional protections that were not previously necessary (door latch guards, camera systems, hire Sheriff), or lost productivity (sending two members of staff when only one was necessary due to safety). In units where there are active drug dealers, there are often several guests which raises the level of concern for safety. Drug dealing units are frequently associated with other unwanted behaviors such as theft and human trafficking, including prostitution. We have not seen these level of behaviors co-occurring in the past.*

*There is also the emotional costs of working with members of our community in tragic situations who may have nowhere to go. We have empathy for them, but we also need to protect our residents and their homes. This level of empathy can wear on staff requiring management to look for additional supports to retain our experienced and trained staff.*

## **Closing**

*I believe that enforcement of current laws would help support our community. This includes residents who may be breaking conditions of their release.*

*With the current eviction caseload in the courts taking extended period to process, we would encourage the adding of additional judge(s) to support the timely processing of these evictions.*

*There should be additional supports added to the current no trespass order process that allows removal from the property and not just the common areas. One of our greatest tools would be the ability to remove those who mean to harm to our communities. At the same time, we understand that many of these individuals may require services such as addiction treatment, which we would support additional funding of. Currently, our Housing Retention and Services team helps get those suffering from addiction in touch with service providers.*

*I would like to see an expedited eviction process for those dealing drugs in housing provided primarily to vulnerable populations. I view this as being akin to school zones. We are not looking to remove a right to due process, just an expedited process.*