Testimony to the Joint House and Senate Appropriations Committees by Beth Davis, February 18, 2026

Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Beth Davis, and I live in rural Addison County with my husband and our 43-year-old son, Craig. I am one of the over 175 parents in the Developmental Disabilities Housing Initiative advocating for permanent service supported housing for our son who requires moderate to high support services.

People with disabilities are frequently the victims of systemic discrimination, otherwise known as “ableism”. Although we publicly declare that people with disabilities deserve the same opportunities as everyone else, the reality is that they are unconsciously thought of as inferior people. The unalienable rights codified in our Declaration of Independence of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are not, and were not intended to be, available to people with disabilities.

As you are probably aware, the Brandon Training School was opened in 1915 to provide care for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In 1993, the state of Vermont decided to close the Brandon Training School to stop the practice of segregating people with disabilities. 2,324 people lived at the Brandon Training School between 1915 and 1993. Families were assured that the residents of the school would be cared for by the state. The Vermont plan was to integrate individuals with disabilities into their local community primarily by having them live with Shared Living Providers. Originally, most of these home providers were former training school staff. This seemed like a sensible solution, and it was for some people. However, these Shared Living Providers are aging, and the agencies are having difficulty finding new providers.

The closing of the Brandon Training School created an overreaction by state social services and their designated agencies when creating rules regarding housing choices for adults with intellectual and intellectual and developmental disabilities. The state of Vermont has been stuck in the philosophy that one model fits all, and that the Shared Living Provider model is the best, and certainly the cheapest, model for people with disabilities. It is essentially foster care for adults, with minimal oversight by the state and virtually zero training and accountability for the providers. Another issue is that many Shared Living Providers live in rural areas resulting in very limited access to the community. Although a very few people also live in group homes, it is not an ideal setting for many people. The idea of the Least Restrictive Environment which has long applied to public schools seems to have been ignored when it comes to adult living situations.

The reality is that the state of Vermont primarily relies on the least expensive housing solution for individuals with disabilities, that is, their parents and families.

Our son, Craig, is 43 years old and is on the autism spectrum. Let me tell you a little about him. Craig is a Lego enthusiast and an avid reader, especially fantasy and science fiction. He enjoys jigsaw puzzles and word puzzles. He loves to go to yard sales and thrift stores to find that perfect present for members of his family. Craig participates in Special Olympics snowshoeing and track and field. He is a son, a brother, and an uncle. If you ask him about his dreams for his life, he will tell you that he wants a girlfriend, a job and a home of his own (in that order!) He does not want to live with his parents. He would like to live in his own apartment near his friends where he could walk to the library, the store, and Middlebury Bagel! In other words, he would like to have a normal life.

Craig has lived with two shared living providers and in a group home. However, neither of these models were a good fit for him, either because they restricted his access to the community, or they were too restrictive with unnecessary rules. In the case of the group home, there was very little sound insulation in an old house which caused severe sensory issues and undue stress for him. It was an untenable situation for him, and his psychiatrist insisted that living in the group home was detrimental to his emotional and psychological health. He has lived with us now for four years, because there are currently no housing choices in our community. My husband and I are both retired, in our 70's, and we did not imagine that our retirement years would include looking after our adult son.

About two years ago, I discover that Summit Properties had received a grant from the Vermont Housing Conservation Board to build low-income subsidized housing in Middlebury. I immediately formed a committee of parents of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities who were looking for housing for their adult children living at home with their parents. This seemed like the perfect solution for our adult children. We met with Summit but were told that we were too late. All of the subsidized apartments had been reserved for people who were homeless. At this point, I appealed to Kirsten Murphy who agreed to set up a meeting with the Land Access Opportunity Board, Vermont Housing Conservation Board, the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council and the Developmental Disability Housing Initiative leaders. We have been meeting as a group every other week for more than a year to try to figure out solutions to this housing problem. In the meantime, the lack of federal housing vouchers has made a bad situation even worse.

The legislature can begin to right that wrong now with legislative actions proposed in *The Road Home report.* The passage of Act 69 gathered all of the leaders and thinkers in the housing and intellectual and developmental disability community to come up with a solution for housing the estimated 600+ adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities who need housing. Their report, *The Road Home*, summarizes their findings.

In terms of legislation, there are six crucial actions recommended by the Act 69 *The Road Home* report:

1. A new permanent position at the Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living – to support housing development and housing process for participants in Home and Community Based Services. This position is included in S. 328, a Senate Housing Committee bill.
2. New funding for Vermont Housing and Conservation Board to develop developmental disability service supported housing. S. 328 includes $3 Million – *The Road Home* Report recommends $5-10 million per year for 5 years.
3. New funding for Rental Assistance – *The Road Home* report recommends the State fund rental assistance for participants in the Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living's Home and Community Based Services programs- similar to the state funded rental assistance for participants in the Department of Mental Health's programs. *The Road Home* report recommends $1-2 million dollars per year for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities to have parity with adults receiving services through the Department of Mental Health. The Bridge Rental Assistance Program proposed by the Vermont State Housing Authority would include $500,000 for 30 vouchers for adults in the Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living's Home and Community Based Services.
4. If #3 is not funded, there is an immediate need for 30 state funded rental assistance vouchers to support the tenants in the Service Supported housing the legislature has invested in – for example the Developmental Disabilities Housing Initiative pilot projects in Waterbury and Burlington, and new developmental disability housing projects in the Vermont Housing Conservation Board pipeline - White River Junction. $500,000.00 dollars estimated annual investment.
5. A new permanent position at Agency of Human Services acting as a central individual to coordinate housing development for all Agency of Human Services clients.
6. Create an Advisory Committee for the Implementation of The Road Home.
7. Create a Housing Navigator for People with Disabilities at the Land Access Opportunity Board.

In 2014, The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services set forth the rules regarding the qualities for a Home and Community-Based Setting for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

To summarize, the home setting must:

Give the individual full access to the greater community,
Be selected by the individual from many setting options,
Insure the rights of privacy, dignity and respect,
Provide individual initiative, autonomy, and independence in making life choices,
Ensure individual choice regarding services and supports.

Vermont is bound by law to adhere to the rules set forth by the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services. Clearly these rules are not being followed. Individuals have very little choice in the freedoms outlined by the rules. Many of the individuals who live with home providers have very limited autonomy. Since the primary housing solutions offered by the state of Vermont are Shared Living Providers and a very small number of group homes, most adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities live with their aging parents, a situation which is not sustainable or fair.

Governor Dean promised back in 1993 that all of Vermont's individuals with disabilities would be taken care of after the closing of the Brandon Training School. It is a sad state of affairs that over 600 adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Vermont still need housing.

It is time for the state of Vermont to take the lead in "thinking outside of the box" and giving financial incentives for local agencies who serve individuals with disabilities to innovate and brainstorm new solutions that give their clients a choice in where to live. This should not be the responsibility of their parents and families. As baby boomer parents age, this crisis will only get worse. The state of Vermont needs to own this crisis that was created by a lack of planning for the future. It's time to treat adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities as human beings that deserve to live with dignity in a home of their choosing.