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April 10, 2014

Senate Health and Welfare Committee
Sen. Claire Ayer, Chair
Statehouse
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633

Re: H.699 (An Act Relating to Temporary Housing)

Dear Sen. Ayer and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.699 (An Act Relating to Temporary Housing). The bill is modest in scope and relates to Vermont's General Assistance program ("GA") and the ability of the poorest homeless Vermonters to contribute to their shelter expenses. **We support passage of the bill with a modest amendment.**

The proposed of amendment is a compromise allowing categorically eligible Vermonters to save their income for better housing solutions or to meet daily needs, while providing the state flexibility to request contribution of up to 30% of income for those who are not eligible for the program "but for" harsh cold weather conditions. **We believe this is a reasonable compromise that protects those who the legislature has described as particularly vulnerable while balancing the cost concerns of the Department.**

We also support striking the "repeal" or "sunset" language of the bill as passed by the House. We hope you will consider that amendment as well.

Currently, Department rules requires homeless Vermonters who are eligible for the GA program to contribute half of all income and resources to their temporary shelter costs. Program beneficiaries may access temporary shelter based on categorical eligibility ("catastrophic" designation up to 84 days; "vulnerable" populations up to 28 days), or under a "cold weather" exception to the rules that relaxes eligibility rules for applicants who may not otherwise qualify, but who are homeless when temperatures reach below 20 degrees or 32 degrees and precipitation.

As you know, GA Temporary Shelter program costs have increased significantly in recent years. However, we do not believe that requiring some individuals to pay half their incomes to a

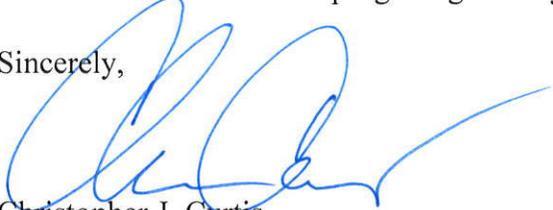
motel serves the policy goals of the state. In fact, the current policy undermines the goals of the GA program because some individuals required to contribute 50% of income end up spending that income and exhausting the benefit resulting in no money and no shelter at the end of the benefit period. This is an undesirable result.

We believe the budget impact of eliminating the “50% rule” will be negligible. In the first instance, many individuals are have no income or resources, or have very little. In the second , many eligible homeless Vermonters are exhausting these very temporary benefits anyway. So, even with contribution the state is saving little or nothing. Homeless Vermonters would be better served by saving every dime they can in order to exit the program as soon as possible.

We do believe the bill as originally presented to the House is the best policy and would provide families the most flexibility. That said, the proposal of amendment takes into consideration the House position and testimony we have heard from the Department that “cold weather” exception participants who are not ordinarily eligible for the program are contributing to increasing costs and that some of those individuals may have other resources or shelter options but that with little time to consider requests the Department cannot necessarily timely verify applicant information. The compromise language takes all these factors into account.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions about H.699, the proposed amendment, or the General Assistance program generally. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Christopher J. Curtis
Staff Attorney
Vermont Legal Aid, Inc.