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*Agency of Human Services*

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Senate Health & Welfare Committee

FROM: Barbara Cimaglio, Deputy Commissioner, Alcohol & Drug Abuse Programs 

RE: Testimony on S.219

DATE: January 27, 2014

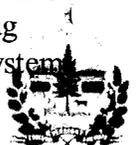
I am submitting this memo in response to your request for testimony on S.219 from the Vermont Department of Health. This bill proposes to create a voluntary regulatory system for sober houses operating in the State of Vermont.

The legislation mentions the Oxford House network which is the largest voluntary organization of sober houses nationally and they list four houses in Vermont, Burlington area, that are members of their network. Members are non-profit organizations that form Chapters and adhere to regulations established by the national network. They are self-governing; they must operate by the rules of the Oxford House organization and must receive a charter from the national board of directors. The board may revoke the charter if the local house violates the standards. An important requirement is that the houses are self-supporting and have sound financial policies to ensure that residents contribute to the expenses of the house.

Sober houses have been operating across the United States for many years. While most operate independently, the Federal Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant (SAPT BG) awarded to each state allows funds to be used for the development of group homes for recovering substance abusers through the operation of a revolving loan fund. There is a limit on the amount of SAPT BG dollars that can be used for this purpose. Vermont has not chosen to set up such a revolving loan fund. The Vermont Department of Health does not fund any independent sober houses, but does provide some funds for transitional or halfway houses that are operated by approved substance abuse treatment or recovery centers (see listings on our website:

<http://healthvermont.gov/adap/treatment/documents/TreatmentDirectory2013.pdf>

The bill proposes a set of common operating and service standards in all sober houses. This is important for consumer protection, especially if state funds are granted to the organization. As with any new standard or regulation there would be administrative tasks necessary to develop a system of compliance. This could be done through regulation or through the grant agreements that are developed when funds are awarded. There would also be administrative time required for the Vermont Alcohol and Drug Information Clearinghouse (VADIC) to develop and oversee a system for maintaining a listing system



for the sober houses. It isn't clear in the bill who would be expected to ensure that the sober houses are meeting the requirements or how that information would be conveyed to the VADIC. VADIC is not a regulatory agency.

We would also suggest that you amend the definition to state that the environment for a sober house is "free of illicit drugs", to include the possibility that residents may be on Medication Assisted Treatment with methadone or buprenorphine, or be taking other psychotropic medications for mental health disorders.

In summary, the proposal for voluntary standards for sober houses is important and timely. Building on standards that have already been established by a national organization such as Oxford House ensures not only that the houses adhere to a national standard, but also that they could receive help in establishing new houses and maintaining existing ones. At the state level, it must be clear who establishes and maintains the standards, whether by legislation or by an entity, and how they are regulated/enforced. There should be an analysis of the operational costs involved both for the houses and for the regulating entity.