

S.219

Regulation of Sober Houses

Testimony of Charlotte Strasser for the Senate Health and Welfare Committee

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I find myself somewhat of an accidental witness here today. If you had asked me six months ago what a sober house was I wouldn't have known, but what I have learned in the past six months I can't unlearn and I didn't want to be complacent only to find that years from now when there are serious problems, that I had possessed the knowledge to take proactive measures and hadn't spoken out.

If you do an internet search of sober houses you will find a multitude of news articles regarding communities and states that are grappling with the proliferation of unlicensed for profit sober living homes. News stories from Connecticut, California, New York and Massachusetts tell of unscrupulous operators who do little more than provide a roof and collect the rent. There is drug use and distribution on the premises. There is no commitment to treatment or recovery. Because these homes are exempt from local zoning laws, there is no limit on the number of individuals who can inhabit a home. Local officials are besieged by noise complaints and neighbors have experienced a reduction in their quality of life. Tragic results have occurred including arson, murder and death by overdose. To an unscrupulous operator, sober houses are easy money. It is naïve to believe that all individuals who operate sober houses have the best interests of the residents at heart. Where there is easy money to be made, exploitation will occur.

For those sober living houses currently operating in Vermont in a responsible manner, regulation will only help to legitimize them. Regulation would assure potential residents of certain standards and neighborhoods would also have assurances regarding its operation. Whom are we protecting by failing to regulate these homes? The vulnerable population they serve, the neighborhoods in which they reside or the operators who profit from them?

As we have all been made aware, opiate addiction in our state is a huge and growing problem. The need for safe reputable recovery options is only going to increase. We have the opportunity before us now to strengthen the recovery options available to Vermonters suffering from addiction or if we choose to do nothing reap the unfortunate consequences that our neighboring states are facing. Don't we owe it to our recovering addicts and alcoholics that when they choose to continue their treatment at a sober house that they will be protected from exploitation and the environment will truly assist them in their recovery? And don't we owe it to the neighbors that they can be assured that a standard of operation is being followed? We, as a caring community, should expect the highest quality for all parties.