

## **S.219**

### **Regulation of Sober Houses**

#### **Written Testimony of Mary Woodruff for the Senate Health and Welfare Committee**

**January 28, 2014**

As Vermont seeks to address and provide for the needs of addicts and individuals in recovery it must strengthen and build a system of care that includes evidence based programs, services and supports. Evidence based sober houses are part of this system of care and S.219 is a necessary and vital step toward assuring that addicts and individuals in recovery have access to the type of housing that meets their needs and promotes leading a successful life.

Sober houses are not all created equal. Owners and operators of sober houses have varying motivations, which can be at cross purposes with addiction and social services toward achieving positive behavior outcomes for residents. Protection of vulnerable sober house residents, neighborhoods and communities from unscrupulous owners and operators is necessary for assuring the outcomes that benefit the individual residents and society are achieved. We can't be naïve and believe all sober house owners and operators are altruistic. Nor should we think that what has happened in other communities with poorly managed, for profit sober houses won't happen here. Substandard sober houses place demands on public safety and social services and divert resources from many others who are in need.

I ask that the committee strengthen S.219 by requiring sober house owners and operators have employment experience in the substance abuse and mental health fields. In addition, we must ensure the safety of vulnerable residents by requiring owners and operators to have backgrounds free of felony convictions, substantiated complaints of abuse, neglect or exploitation, convictions for bodily injury and/or the theft or misuse of funds or property. Furthermore, to ensure the safety of neighborhoods and communities I suggest a provision for reporting complaints.

I urge the committee consult Deputy Commissioner Barbara Cimaglio of the Vermont Department of Health, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs, J. Paul Molloy, founder of the non-profit sober house network Oxford House, and others to better understand sober house operation and management. The report "Sober Houses and the Fair Housing Act: A Report Prepared for the Vermont Legislature" by Susan Mehrtons is a resource with background information that frames the issue at hand.

Strong legislation to regulate sober houses protects us all and assists in maximizing the return on investments made in recovery services and supports. The recovery system is only as strong as its weakest link. Let's pass legislation that makes sober houses a strong link.