

- Melissa Riegel-Garrett, I live and work in Washington County
- Work as the executive director for a statewide non-profit organization, the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children.
- I am the home-owner of the sober-house located at 19 East Street in Waterbury.
- Thank you for the opportunity to testify on S219, an Act relating to sober houses. I would like to start by noting this is a monumental time in Vermont as we grapple with how society supports people suffering from addiction.
- S219 could be an opportunity to recognize the place sober housing has in the recovery process. I caution that we need to get policies right in order to provide the kinds of support those in the recovery community need and ensure we do not set up barriers to their access to this support.
- All Vermonters who seek sober-houses as a part of their recovery process have access to that support. Not currently the case, with Chittenden cty having the most available.
- What is the intent of regulation? **To ensure those seeking sober-housing have access to a healthy, safe environment that supports their sobriety.**
- I bring a few perspectives to this question,
  - In my field of early childhood we work with regulations and standards all of the time, their intent is to ensure the children who access early childhood programs in our state are in safe and healthy environments that supports their development. (Not so unlike the need here, EXCEPT in S219 the population we are focusing on is Adults, Vermonters with the right to vote...which means they can have a certain amount of responsibility for regulating their own environments.) Interestingly, last year I participated in a year-long process led by Reeva Murphy of the child development division to revise the early childhood program regulations—which will be promulgated this session, we hope. Ms. Murphy engaged the field in this revision. **How have people in recovery and organizations that support recovery been engaged in the development of this bill?**
  - A second perspective I bring is that of a landlord and home-owner. My husband and I bought 19 East Street from my parents in 2003 and since then have rented the basement apartment. For the year prior to 19 East Street becoming a sober house, we rented to an individual who was on Section 8 housing—and had to abide by the regulations set forth by Housing and Urban Development. Interestingly, some **parts of S219 are more restrictive for home-owners than section 8 housing requirements!** This does not make sense to me, and frankly **concerns me that the requirements drafted in this bill will discourage home-owners from renting to those seeking a sober environment.**

- Finally, I bring the perspective of being a part of a family whose members suffer from alcoholism, and I now count as friends several people whom are in recovery from addiction. In this role, I **feel passionately if we are going to develop policies on sober-housing, that these policies increase access, and do not set up barriers.** I don't know exact numbers of people in recovery in Vermont, but I really hope, on behalf of the other sisters, parents, friends and family members, that we find a way as a state to support recovery.
- In general, if we are going to regulate sober-houses, I urge you to do the due diligence necessary to ensure the bill that is passed is the least restrictive possible, while ensuring health and safety of the property and increasing access for those who seek it.

Specifically:

- Let's look at regulations that already exist for housing that is funded by public dollars. Section 8 housing is one I am familiar with, perhaps there are others. **I am not sure why the regulations for sober-houses (other than the requirement of a commitment to sobriety) should be more restrictive than other housing supported by public funding.**
  - Non-smoking (pg 2, line 4): as a home-owner, we chose to have this as part of our rental agreements—and still do. Enforcement is an issue. Our last tenant smoked inside regardless.
  - Curfew (pg 2, line 7): It is important to remember that these are adults who have chosen a living arrangement to support their sobriety. In the last year my family lived in the house, we had two older teenagers living with us, who came and went late at night in their loud cars. Their curfew, or not, was determined by our family.
  - Notifications to appropriate state authorities. (pg 2, beginning line 8). My questions are, who is the appropriate state authority? And to what end are these notifications made? Again, I point us to the HUD regulations—as an example for the requirements for when public dollars support housing; I was not aware of any requirements to report to state authorities.
  - Participation by owners and managers in training on housing laws, substance abuse treatment and management. (pg 2, line 14) Having been a home-owner/landlord receiving HUD funding, I was not required to participate in any training. If we are going to go there: Who designs and provides this training? How do we know the training is quality? In my mind, if we really are trying to create the best possible environments for sober living, we should also require the neighbors of the community to take anti-bias and/or tolerance training.
  - The bill calls itself a “voluntary” regulatory system, yet referrals are limited to those who comply with the regulations outlined in the bill. **Will this increase access to sober housing for those who seek it?** The

current referral system, as I understand it is informal, and the need is greater than the availability of houses as evidenced by waitlists at all of the houses I am familiar with. **If we are going to formalize the referral system, what are we doing to increase the number of sober houses throughout Vermont? Who will verify compliance with the requirements in this bill?**

- I understand the desire to have some oversight for public dollars spent, but **as a state we aren't currently spending public dollars on sober houses—and if we were, isn't oversight and accountability built into the funding streams themselves?** Let's get this right by engaging more perspectives in this process. There are other agencies and organizations in VT who should be involved in the development of this bill, not to mention the many Vermonters whom have lived in, or are still living in sober-houses. **Let's not build a policy on the experience of one sober-house that has been in operation less than a year—let's hear from others, including other home-owners, to ensure we develop regulation that is meaningful, and respectful to the adults who choose to live in these environments.**

In conclusion, let's not rush into this. Vermonter's pursuing recovery deserve policies that include their perspectives, as well as the perspectives of others who are working to support them. What does this bill leave out that could make all the difference to the adults that we hope to support? What does this bill include that will discourage the development of sober houses in communities where there currently are none? Is this the right bill? If it moves forward, details of this bill need to be clarified and responsibilities determined. Thank you for your time.

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**(HUD) Landlord's Obligations:** The role of the landlord in the voucher program is to provide decent, safe, and sanitary housing to a tenant at a reasonable rent. The dwelling unit must pass the program's housing quality standards and be maintained up to those standards as long as the owner receives housing assistance payments. In addition, the landlord is expected to provide the services agreed to as part of the lease signed with the tenant and the contract signed with the PHA.