

**Testimony given to the Senate Health & Welfare Committee
By Christine Hart, Executive Director, Brattleboro Housing Authority**

February 20, 2013

The committee would like to pass along the following question to help frame your testimony for tomorrow:

Given the current state of housing budget pressures, what can we do to efficiently utilize the funding to prevent homelessness and promote retention and better coordination of services?

Ms. Hart: Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to address your Committee and especially to do so by phone.

In responding to the question you sent me I would like to share with you what I see as the key words and key concept that need to be recognized as we move forward to address these issues.

The most important concept is that affordable housing should be seen as a platform for services: What does this mean in the real world of today? It means that the Public Housing Authorities and Non-Profit Housing Providers in Vermont are now doing a whole lot more than just providing the bricks and mortar of affordable housing. Public Housing Authorities and Non-Profits are increasingly providing or connecting community services in their housing.

To prevent homelessness: The Brattleboro Housing Authority developed with our social service providers, an extremely successful program called Transitions to Housing. This program takes homeless families, wraps around services and gets them housed with local landlords. We've had this program for over 5 years and it has been by all measures extremely successful. It takes families that were hard to get or keep housed and gives them the skills and opportunities to become reliable renters. If this sounds similar to the AHS proposed Family Services Housing program Angus has proposed, it's not a coincidence. Our Transitions Program is funded by AHS with the funding focused on housing support because the rental vacancy rates in Brattleboro are consistently extremely low.

To promote retention: Housing as a platform is demonstrated by the following programs which our Housing Authority manages as do other Housing Authorities in Vermont: Family Self Sufficiency for residents in public housing; Family Self Sufficiency for those in the Section 8 Voucher Program; Resident Services Coordination for residents in public housing and; Support And Services at Home or SASH. These are all service coordination programs in housing run by housing focused on using the existing service providers to connect residents to increase their self-sufficiency be it through work, education, or life skills. Through these programs, staff is also connecting residents to service providers to assist in their health, well-being and aging well in place. We, in Brattleboro and across Vermont, have a rich and vast array of service providers yet the connection to them by our residents and program participants is very difficult to make and, frankly, the connection among multiple providers working with a family or resident is also often very difficult to achieve. Thus a Resident Services Coordinator and/or SASH Coordinator becomes the essential rim that connects all the services/providers (spokes) who are engaged with resident/participant (the hub).

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Finally, to the issue of better coordination of services: I believe Vermont State governmental agencies need to acknowledge and use the existing community networks which have been developed over the last decades not continue to create siloed programs which only duplicate what is or could be done given the strong community connections we have at the local level. Further, these silos use Vermont funds on special programs sometimes from elsewhere when they could (as CAX would say) be made in Vermont. I could give you many, many examples of where this has and is being done but I will keep it to two.

First a good example where our local connections are being well used in creating a new State program: AHS has proposed the Family Services and Housing program which is calling on local service providers and the Public Housing and Non-Profit Housing providers to figure out how to create a program to respond to the AHS goal of decreasing motel stays. In Brattleboro we have the Transition Program which I previously mentioned so I believe we are a step ahead in meeting the goals of the RFP. I commend Angus of AHS for giving us the goals, some structure but for leaving the process up to the local community services and housing providers. We have AHS leadership from the District Field Director to help guide us in the process which is very helpful. While we might find some parts of the FSH program we'd like to change, as a first step it is really a great model and one which I would love to see other agencies of the State use.

This brings me to the second example which is not so positive: The recently released Global Commitment to Health 1115 Demonstration Waiver also known as the Dual Eligible Proposal. This is aimed at those who are Medicaid and Medicare eligible. While the proposal has an exhaustive list of programs to be folded under it, **nowhere in the entire proposal is the state wide and successful SASH program even mentioned.** It is as if DVHC and DAIL didn't know SASH which is a part of the Vermont Blueprint for Health, existed! SASH is right now bringing essential health services coordination and wellness programs to thousands of Vermonters living in affordable housing. In Rutland where the SASH program has been measurably changing the lives of public housing and community residents for almost two years, the Public Housing Director states that 66 out of their 141 residents are dual eligible. We, at the Brattleboro Housing Authority, estimate that 187 out of our 220 residents are dual eligible. Our SASH program is immensely successful and creating a duals program which ignores its existence is, frankly, a misuse of State dollars and extremely poor state programming.

I will close by underscoring my key words and concept: Affordable housing in Vermont is a service platform and as such it is already providing and collaborating on essential services for Vermonters. I am on the VHCB Board so I truly appreciate the importance of our farm buildings but *please no more siloes of State programs!* Use the existing community networks and wealth of service programs in developing new State programs in all areas but especially these three: homelessness, retention of housing and the ability of our elders and persons with disabilities to age well in their housing.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present these remarks.