

**Vermont Legislative Day
February 26, 2014
Vermont Housing and Conservation Board
Testimony from Dismas of Vermont
Executive Director: Jan Tarjan**

Introduction

Good Morning, Chairperson Ayer and members of the Committee. I am delighted to be here today to represent Dismas of Vermont, and to support the crucial work of the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. I am the Executive Director of Dismas of Vermont. I also bring you greetings from Rita McCaffrey, our Founder and first Executive Director, who was an honored member of the legislature and of this committee in 1989-90. Rita is still very much a part of Dismas work, serving particularly in the development of our fourth and newest Dismas House, at Hartford Village.

Description of Dismas of Vermont

Dismas is a provider of transitional housing for men and women coming out of Vermont prisons and starting new lives in our communities. Our mission is to “reconcile prisoners to society and society to prisoners.” Dismas has been providing housing for one of the most difficult to house segments of our population since 1986. There are four Dismas Houses: one each in Burlington, Winooski, Rutland and now-- sometime in the next three weeks--Hartford Vermont. For the first time we are a statewide organization.

Each Dismas house supports approximately 9 residents coming out of incarceration, and one or two volunteer residents who share their lives and skills within the house, and provide a bridge from the formerly incarcerated residents to the surrounding community. Our houses are family-style homes, not treatment centers. Residents work, pay fees, share activities and dine every night with community volunteers who have provided a home cooked meal. Residents are carefully selected, must agree to live in a strictly sober, non-violent and supportive community, and to help one another make a good transition to life outside prison.

Health and Welfare Benefits

Housing is the chief and obvious benefit for our residents, most of whom cannot leave prison, even though cleared for release, until appropriate housing is obtained. Most of our residents suffer substance addictions—addictions that are either the direct or indirect cause of their incarceration. The supportive, sober, community we build at Dismas is a key component for their continued recovery. Activities, such as volunteering or rock-climbing, build confidence, connect former prisoners to the larger community, and build more positive self-images for our residents.

But we provide more than a house; we provide a home-- a difference that supports better mental and social health for our residents. Many of our residents have told us that our house is the only real home they have ever known, and is the foundation upon which they build the rest of their reintegration. People who are often ashamed and frightened to face their communities again are astounded by the generosity and acceptance of our (hundreds) of volunteers, present daily in our houses.

The typical resident stays with us 3-6 months. Of the residents who stay at least 3 months, over 70% transition successfully to independent living. One year of incarceration in Vermont costs, on average, approximately \$60,000. The cost for one year at Dismas of Vermont is under \$19,000 annually.

How the VHCB Helps

The VHCB has been a crucial partner for Dismas of Vermont. In the 1990's VHCB grants helped us to make important capital improvements to our Burlington and Rutland Houses. VHCB visits our houses from time to time, to check on their investment, and have found our homes to be maintained to a very high standard.

More recently, a support grant of \$162,000 from the VHCB has gone into the complete renovation of the new house in Hartford. VHCB partnered with us to connect to another VHCB non-profit partner to purchase our house and to cover it with a perpetual affordability covenant so that it remains a resource for lower income people into the future. VHCB support brokered American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds for us so that our old, Victorian, house now boasts energy efficient windows, insulation, boiler and solar panels.

Early financial support from VHCB helped us build confidence among other donors and the public. One donor stepped up to more than match the VHCB grant. Another donated \$50,000, and various foundations gave generously. We mentioned VHCB support in our fundraising outreach. Both our capital and annual appeals succeeded our projections by nearly 100%. Dozens of volunteers and many community organizations have contributed supplies, furnishings, services and volunteer labor to complete the Hartford Dismas House.

These many gifts from the community illustrate how much taxpayers realize the need for this housing and this support within our communities, just as VHCB does.

The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board provided approximately 29% of the direct renovation costs for the Hartford Dismas House, or 17% of total development costs in this 5-year process to forge a place for reconciling prisoners in the Windsor and Orange county area. VHCB leaders were exacting overseers of the funds

entrusted to us and gave us excellent professional advice and support for the project. They are always interested, concerned and collegial partners for Dismas.

VHBC support in the past, now, and we hope into the future has contributed enormously to the healthy re-building of hundreds of individual lives and to the improvement of our communities in Vermont.

Thank you legislators, and thank you VHCB.