

**Written Testimony of Susan E. Mehrstens for the Health & Welfare Committee
in re: Senate Bill S.219 on Regulation of Sober Houses
Vermont Legislature
28 January 2014**

First, I would like to thank the members of the Committee for taking the time to hear testimony from Vermont citizens who want to create *quality* experiences for those recovering addicts who live in sober houses. We appreciate your responsiveness to our concerns in this regard.

I have 5 points that, were I able to be present, I would share with the Committee:

Number 1:

‡There is a very significant difference between an Oxford House-type sober home and an “entrepreneurial” sober home:

the Oxford House-type sober home is indistinguishable from other residences in its area:

it does not present parking problems

it does not disturb the neighbors

it does not damage the health and welfare of its residents or of the community

It is created from the “bottom up” by a group of recovering addicts who wish to support each other in their journey to recovery and it is very well run.

The entrepreneurial sober home is very different:

it is created from the “top down” by an entrepreneur (that is, an individual eager to make money)

the entrepreneur does not live in the home, so it is unsupervised which usually leads to a host of problems for the neighborhood, e.g.

parking problems

visual, aural and environmental pollution: garbage shrewn around, noise at all hours, cigarette smoke

poor internal conditions: bedbugs, vermin, lack of heat and hot water and thus

transiency, as few recovering addicts wish to endure such conditions

Such problems have created significant health and welfare problems in communities where such entrepreneurial sober homes have become widespread, e.g. Shirley & Mastic on Long Island.

Number 2:

‡The sober home at 19 East Street in Waterbury is of the entrepreneurial type and the neighborhood has been beset with the problems listed in Point #1.

Number 3:

‡One of the most ardent advocates of the sober house concept is J. Paul Malloy, the founder of Oxford House and himself a recovering alcoholic. We are extremely fortunate in having Mr. Malloy willing to present testimony to you about this Bill, as he is aware of the distinction between the Oxford House model and the entrepreneurial type of sober house.

Number 4:

‡We, the neighbors of the Waterbury sober house, have witnessed the Potemkin Village tactics that Andrew Gonyea & Co. used back in August of 2013. Any request to tour the sober home will result in the entrepreneur putting on a nice show, cleaning up the place, and purporting to have the best interests of the residents at heart. Some of our Vermont legislators have been taken in by these tactics. They are not being told the truth, nor are they getting the whole story. I would hope you will listen to the citizens who live in close proximity to the sober house and have had to endure the problems it creates.

Number 5:

‡As I noted in my report “Sober Houses and the Fair Housing Act,” prepared for the Vermont Legislature, to attempt to regulate sober homes is to enter perilous territory. Yet there are ways to implement change and improve the conditions in our Vermont communities. I list 5 actions the Legislature might undertake in the last paragraph of the Executive Summary of the report, a copy of which is attached here.

Respectfully submitted,
Susan Mehrstens, Ph.D.