

Testimony to Senate Appropriations on April 7, 2015

Regarding Housing Resources for Vermonters Experiencing Homelessness, or Attempting to Avoid Homelessness

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Thank you for the work that you did last year in considering the needs of the most vulnerable Vermonters. The support that you provided for programs addressing poverty truly has made a difference in the lives of struggling constituents. We recognize that your funding choices this year will be even more challenging. My principal ask is for you to continue to support the housing and homelessness alleviation programs that the House has included in its budget.

At the Haven, we offer a food shelf, non-categorical community case management, a family shelter, a shelter for adults without children with them, a Seasonal Overnight Shelter, a strong children's services program, and a variety of educational and support programs. The number of those in need has continued to increase, with approximately 5% more households with 13% more volume of need coming through our doors than ever before. The good news is that the rate of increase seems to have stabilized; the bad news is that the growth has not stopped.

Vermont Rental Subsidies have enabled families with children to move out of our shelter to apartments they can afford. One young mother with an autistic 6 year old and an 18 month old has been able to get a job as a medical secretary, to have the child care she needs, and to look forward to sufficient income to exit public supports. None of it could have happened without the jump-start of a subsidy. We also implement one of the Family Supportive Housing projects, working deeply with fifteen families at this moment. The families include a mix of couples and single parents. One single mom lived in her car for several months before receiving help that "clicked"; her daughter lived with friends but struggled in school. Now they are reunified in an apartment; the mom has strong mental health services, financial coaching, and is preparing to take on a job; the child has support services of her own and has jumped a grade level in school in three months. Overall statewide the success rate of the programs you funded last year - "is anybody better off" - is remarkably high.

Although only 6% of our own budget comes from any public source, we have benefited from an Emergency Solutions Grant through OEO that allowed us to stretch our core shelter operational capacity to add a warming shelter late last winter and now for this entire winter. We partner with our local Economic Services Division office; for example this past week they have used State funds to pay for hotel nights for three families and three single individuals who are too mentally ill for a shelter or with medical exception letters from doctors; and we have used the warming shelter for 9 others referred by ESD. This example points out that while warming shelters can help, some funds will still be needed for GA temporary housing.

Of proposed cuts in the budget, I would like to note three.

1. VHCB enabled us to construct the most recent building on our campus housing up to 22 people per night. Annually it sponsors the AmeriCorps member who carries an important role with our Children's Services. It is truly an effective and visionary model for the nexus of issues of housing and conservation.
2. Legal Aid is a significant resource for Vermonters. Our case managers are calling VLA frequently, unwinding the situations that have become unimaginably entangled. So often one small thing went wrong, and then because of that five other things fell apart. Law is one of the tools for justice and equity, which are often in short supply for people in poverty.
3. The third cut is to the Direct Service and Service Coordination Grants through the Office of the Secretary. That total proposed cut statewide is half of the current allocation, about \$200,000. At the Haven we collaborate with the Field Services Director for two of the 12 Districts, Springfield and Hartford. I can demonstrate that the funds in these districts have been leveraged to about three times their value through partnerships and careful negotiation for the years those funds have existed. It is a small amount of money in the big picture but of great significance at the local level. It is an example of where a little goes along way, and would represent a loss bigger than the cut.

Thank you for listening and for all your hard work.