



November 12, 2015

TO: Rep. Jill Krowinski, Chair
Vermont Child Poverty Council

FROM: Auburn Watersong, Associate Director of Public Policy
Gilan M. Merwanji, Economic Justice and Policy Coordinator

RE: The relationship between survivors and Vermont's Housing Crisis

Thank you, for the invitation to speak to you about the housing crisis faced by so many children of Vermont's domestic and sexual violence victims and survivors.

For years, advocates have known that domestic violence is a primary cause of homelessness for women and families. Too often a victim is forced to make the untenable choice between violence or homelessness. In Vermont, this choice is becoming increasingly more prevalent. Homelessness in Vermont rose 9% between 2013 and 2014. On any given night 1,556 Vermonters are without housing and nearly one in four are children under 18. Families with children now constitute nearly half of all people in Vermont's emergency shelters.¹

As of December 2014, 637 Vermonters were in state-supported emergency shelters or transitional programs for the homeless.² The latest national data tells us that in Vermont a person must earn more than \$20 an hour to afford rent for a modest two bedroom apartment. With Vermont's current minimum wage at \$9.15/hour, this means that a single person must work more than 90 hours a week to afford such an apartment.³

Statewide, in 2014 alone, Vermont's domestic and sexual violence shelters and programs provided nearly 29,000 bednights to victims and their children. 7,251 adults and 1,348 children were housed in our 9 emergency shelters alone and our shelters had to turn away 346 people due to inadequate capacity.⁴ Emergency Shelter grant funding reports indicated an increase in emergency housing need from 33% of families in 2012 to 49% of families spending their stay at domestic and sexual

¹ *Calling for an End to Family Homelessness*, Ending Family Homelessness in Vermont, Vermont AHS, January 2015.

² *Ibid.*

³ *2014 State Housing Profile – Vermont*, National Low Income Housing Coalition, Sept. 2014.

⁴ 2014 Annual Report, Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, January 2015.

violence shelters in 2014. Victim advocates report an increased length of stay at emergency shelters due to a lack of safe, affordable housing for victims in their communities. In addition, national data tells us that victims

Victims of domestic violence who are parents may seek emergency housing when fleeing an abusive situation but may wish to remain in their communities in order to keep their children in the same school system. This can prove challenging with vacancy rates throughout the state being so low, and the cost of living being so high. Victims in Vermont who stay in shelter often struggle to find local available housing and if they do they often struggle to secure the resources necessary to relocate. In addition, victims often face the challenges which result from economic abuse, including damaged credit, poor rental histories, and limited (if any) supports from family and friends. Vermont advocates know that victims will often return to their abuser for lack of housing. National studies have indicated that as many as 44%, almost half of all victims of domestic violence stayed in abusive relationships because they had nowhere else to go.⁵

Because emergency shelters for victims are typically at capacity and victims are unable to find permanent housing, more victims are turning to the state funded AHS emergency housing general assistance program for hotel/motel vouchers. *The General Assistance Emergency Housing Bi-Annual Report* to the legislature, presented in July of 2015, revealed that “the need for emergency housing and its cost continues to be prohibitively expensive, particularly among households with victims of domestic violence.” The report recognized that long-term funding for emergency housing through hotels and motels would not be sustainable. Given this recognition, coupled with the ever increasing housing needs of victims and their children, the Network continues to renew our commitment to seek every possible option to increase victim access to safe affordable housing, including:

- Supporting proposals which generate revenue in order to fund General Assistance, rental assistance and the development of affordable housing (i.e. \$2 fee per overnight per hotel/motel patron).
- Supporting proposals which seek to increase funding for Sec 8 housing (federal HUD advocacy).
- Advocating for a reinstatement of Section 8 domestic violence housing preference.
- Increasing awareness of existing laws/policies (VAWA, Fair Housing Act) and efforts to enforce penalties for noncompliance.

⁵ In 2003, 44% of homeless women in Fargo, North Dakota, reported that they had previously stayed in abusive relationships because they had nowhere else to go; in Minnesota, 46%. Wilder Research Center, *Homeless in Minnesota 2003* 22, 38 (2004).

- Supporting efforts to increase the supply of housing especially to victims of DV (i.e. landlord incentives).
- Increasing the financial support of emergency housing programs which strive to meet needs of victims who are actively fleeing violence (shelters, hotel/motel vouchers etc.)
- Increasing financial support of victim-centered low-income transitional housing units and programs (6 -24 months).

No one item alone will remedy the housing crisis faced by victims and their children – but a multi-pronged approach that includes these strategies will help victim parents and their children avoid an inevitable return to abuse for lack of housing in Vermont. No victim should ever be forced to choose between abuse and homelessness – that is no choice at all.

Thank you,

Gilan