

Testimony of Sara Kobylenski, Hartland, VT,
Steering Committee Member, Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition, and
representing the experience of The Upper Valley Haven
regarding child and family homelessness
October 25, 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you, and for the important work you are doing on behalf of all Vermonters.

By way of introduction, I share that I am a social worker by training and have worked in community based child and family service organizations for much of my 50 year career. I also served as the AHS Field Director for the Hartford District as part of the first cohort in that role between 2004 and 2009. In March 2009 I became the Executive Director of the Upper Valley Haven. Through my work at the Haven I served a term as co-chair of the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness, and am currently a member of the Steering Committee of the Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition. I officially retired from the Haven two weeks ago, and the Haven's current Executive Director, Michael Redmond, is here today, too.

The Haven serves people struggling with poverty through provision of food, shelter, service coordination or problem solving, and education. It is the second largest distributor of food after the Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf, and includes three shelters, one hosting 8 families with children; one hosting 21 adults without children with them; and for the past four winters, a seasonal shelter that has grown to a capacity of 18 people over the age of 18. Our problem solving domain enables anyone walking through the door to become connected with needed services or resources. Sometimes that is pretty direct and easy; other times there are gaps in community services and resources and it is a struggle. Our clinical staff also works with people while they are in shelter, and in post shelter support programs. The education program includes a free after school program and full day eight week summer program for any child who is currently in the shelter, or who was ever in the shelter. The importance of trauma informed programming and practice, and attention to social and emotional learning that you have heard about from others are hallmarks of the Haven's children's services and of all its services.

Those of us who work with families and children experiencing homelessness understand the concept of "toxic stress" that has been documented by The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. The Children's HealthWatch has also culled important findings from the scientific research on child development. Key points in a report for which pediatrician Megan Sandel is the lead author include the following:

- Young children who experienced homelessness for longer than six months were significantly more likely to have developmental delays, fair or poor health, be overweight, and be hospitalized, than children who never experienced homelessness or did so for less than six months.

- While young children who experienced pre-natal or post-natal homelessness alone had increased negative health outcomes, those who experienced both pre- and post-natal homelessness had even more serious health consequences.
- Young children who experienced both pre- and post-natal homelessness were at an increased risk of having fair or poor health, experiencing developmental delays, and being hospitalized.

The take-away from this for all of us on the ground and for those of you in policy and fiscal planning positions is that housing truly does matter.

Vermont participates in the annual Point in Time Count in late January each year, and this year the count showed 1,291 Vermonters without housing, 511 of whom, 40%, were persons in households with at least one adult and one child. These numbers do not include those people who were “couch surfing” or doubled up with other households, without a true space and place of their own, so we need to be cautious in recognizing the whole scope of the need. We believe that those not counted are more likely to be households with children, as we constantly see that parents will enter into almost any sort of arrangement to find a roof for their child.

Vermont is approaching the challenge of homelessness by focusing on subgroupings within the whole population of those without a safe place fit for human habitation. Veterans, families, youth, single adults who are chronically homeless per the federal definition of that status, and those with severe and persistent mental illness are now better identified. That is the first step to working toward the goal of “functional zero” in homelessness. Functional zero is a term we first heard used by the VA, as it acknowledges that we may never reach a condition of no people who are homeless, but we can reach a level where we are getting people into housing as fast as they are becoming homeless.

Very low income families and similarly very low income single adults are the most often without a place to live. The average two-bedroom apartment in Vermont costs \$1,165 a month, which is affordable at an hourly wage of \$22.40 per hour, or \$46,585 annually. This is known as the “Housing Wage”, published annually by the National Low Income Housing Coalition for all states, and represents the amount that you have to earn working 40 hours per week, 52 weeks per year, to pay no more than 30% of your income for a basic two bedroom apartment. Over 50% of Vermont’s workforce are employed in jobs that pay less, or do not afford them 40 hours of work every week. At the same time, the Roadmap to End Homelessness Report commissioned by the legislature calls for 368 new units of permanent supportive housing and 1,251 new homes made affordable to very low income Vermonters over the next five years. The Vermont Chamber of Commerce has set a growth target of 5000 new and improved housing units annually to meet the overall need for enough housing for all Vermonters.

The three legged stool has become the metaphor for the solution to homelessness. A combination of enough bricks and mortar, i.e. available housing stock; subsidies that assure that people can afford that housing; and supportive services for those who need extra assistance to remain on a good pathway once they have achieved housing, are all necessary.

Vermont has done an excellent job of espousing this mindset, but there are miles to go as the numbers I have cited demonstrate.

Several tools have been particularly helpful in addressing children and families.

- The investments in housing described by Gus Seelig in utilizing the Housing Bond made possible by this legislature are beginning to become real. The low income housing developers around the state have worked diligently and creatively for years and in increasing communication with homeless service providers to make opportunities possible. Other housing developers are now coming to the table in some areas, too.
- Subsidies are an ever moving target. Some of them are part of the low income housing properties, through the built in subsidy of tax credit units that also have project-based operating subsidies or other structures for permanent affordability. Then there are the subsidies that go with the household rather than the property. The Vermont Rental Subsidy program has allowed some families to bridge the gap until other sorts of subsidies can be available. Rapid Rehousing Vouchers, federal subsidies administered by Vermont State Housing Authority, have been a really strong option, but as this week began, the east central part of the state has only one available for use, specifically in the Springfield area. Federal Family Unification Vouchers to prevent the separation of children from their parents can be helpful, but frankly they require authorization from the one division of state government that does not collaborate reliably and consistently, so they are unpredictable even when a supply from the feds has opened up. State Mental Health Vouchers and short term housing dollars through the Department of Corrections have been important in addressing the needs of these specific groups, and are often part of community plans around specific individuals and households. Approximately \$4 million in State Housing Opportunity Grants have been another tool for homeless service providers to use in assisting with the cost of housing for families, through Rapid Rehousing, back rent and other single application uses. The “gold standard” of Section 8 vouchers has been essentially unavailable to new households except in small numbers on an erratic basis, but they remain important in the mix of resources.
- In the realm of Supportive Services, Housing and Opportunity Grants have been important in assisting with the shelter services that are the bridge to permanent housing for families. The two programs that we at the Haven have seen be strongest, most effective and most reliable are Family Supportive Housing and the Housing First approach. We have been documenting, along with the other sites around the state, that the FSH model is helping families to address core issues around housing and financial stability while giving a family a steady, consistent relationship with a caring person. Elizabeth Carpenter-Song, an anthropologist on the faculty of Dartmouth College, has published research in rural family poverty and homelessness that demonstrates that a sense of isolation and despair often undermines progress made by families. This program not only addresses tangible skills for success but breaks down that social and emotional barrier. Funding of supportive services is challenging for the community. As a homeless service provider we were coached on how to step into a new realm and

become an approved Medicaid biller under Vermont's Global Commitment waiver. So long as we do the paperwork correctly, and so long as every family remains Medicaid active, with no gaps, we are reimbursed for the services we provide. We have had to raise private funds to supplement the costs allowed, which is a challenge to all groups providing supportive services.

In summary we are on a journey together, and positive change and progress is happening for some families. We need to be sure we have a good infrastructure of knowledge, support, education and opportunity for all families; and then additional resources for those families and children who are at risk; and finally specialized, deeper, and usually longer lasting supports for those families who will only succeed when they have that help. All of this begins with a safe place to call home.

I know money is perennially in short supply at the State House, but when you get to making recommendations in your final report to the Legislature, I would urge you strongly to recommend full funding for all three legs of the metaphorical three-legged stool:

1. Full funding for bricks and mortar dollars through the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board;
2. Increased funding for housing and housing-related subsidies through the Vermont Rental Subsidy Program, Housing Opportunity Program, and DMH and DOC housing subsidies; and
3. Increased funding for supportive services through Family Supportive Housing, HOP and Housing First.

Thank you.