



Testimony on Homelessness Awareness Day 2018
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House Human Services and House General, Housing and Military Affairs
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Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you regarding the housing concerns faced by Vermont's victims of domestic and sexual violence.

The lack of safe, affordable housing across Vermont and the nation exacerbates the challenges faced by so many victims seeking safety. We know that in Vermont domestic violence is one of the leading causes of homelessness for women and families.

In the most recent Point In Time Count, out of the 852 households that were homeless, 263 of them were reported as fleeing domestic violence, sexual violence, dating violence or stalking. This past year's HOP report shows that between July 1, 2016 and June 30, 2017, Vermont's publicly-funded emergency shelters, reported that out of the 3,952 persons were sheltered, approximately 33% of children (361) and 37% of families (243) were sheltered at a domestic/sexual violence shelter.

For many of our shelters, there has been an increase in length of shelter stay. A major reason for this is the lack of housing for survivors to go into. Where survivors used to be able to use shelters as a short-term emergency solution before going on to find stable housing, they are now staying in shelters longer; unable to find housing sometimes even with subsidies. This creates a bottleneck in our shelters; the shelters are full because they are housing people longer causing them to have to turn away newly fleeing victims and their families.

Not only do domestic and sexual violence increase the risk of homelessness, homelessness also increases someone's risk of physical and sexual violence. In 2002, national research indicated that nearly 1 in 3 homeless women had been sexually or physically assaulted while on the streets. Individuals who lack sufficient economic resources to meet their basic needs may have to resort to bartering for essential goods with sex and are at an increased vulnerability to sexual exploitation/trafficking. This is something that has been seen increasingly in homeless youth here in Vermont.

I have given you a lot of numbers, but thought I would share a couple of stories as well (names changed):

- Kate is an elderly woman, who finally was able to leave her abusive husband after many years. Kate is on SSI and unable to afford market rent. She has been sleeping on the



couch at a friend's home while our advocates work with her to find senior housing, file for divorce and apply for other benefits that she needs such as food.

- An advocate worked with a resident who escaped over 10 years of emotional, physical and financial abuse. This woman came to shelter with two young children and only what she could pack in her car. While in shelter she explored ways to improve her credit as her abuser had taken out many loans in her name. She began an internship and worked on applying for housing. Eventually she moved into an apartment with a state voucher. She also began full time employment. Our advocates continue to work with her on her financial goals.

Domestic and sexual violence advocates and community partners provide vital supports to homeless survivors and their families. The Network appreciates the support that is given federally, through the legislature, and our local communities that allows this work to continue. A major barrier that survivors face, regardless of income, is a lack of housing stock. The investment in the \$35 million housing bond last legislative session was a critical step forward in tackling that problem. Of course, we all know there is more that needs to be done. There is still a great need for subsidy and services in order to ensure that the most vulnerable survivors are able to gain and maintain safe housing. The Network urges continued investment in all types of housing, from emergency housing, to short term subsidy such as the Vermont Rental Subsidy program, to more long term solutions such as permanent supportive housing. Safe, affordable, secure housing is key to creating long term economic stability for survivors.

Your commitment to alleviate the housing challenges faced by Vermont's survivors is vital; it will provide opportunity for victims to find safety and stability without fear of homelessness. No Vermonter should ever have to choose between homelessness and violence, and no Vermonter should ever have to fear violence because they cannot afford housing.

Thank you.