

January 17, 2018

Testimony of LUDY BIDDLE

Executive Director, NeighborWorks of Western Vermont

RE: HEAT Squad funding

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your interest in HEAT Squad.

As you know, we came to your committee and to the legislature last year with a request for \$250,000/year for five years to expand HEAT Squad from the 5 southern counties we are currently serving to all counties in Vermont. We very much appreciated your committee's support last year, and it helped to spur a conversation about HEAT Squad, and to build some strong support in the Appropriations Committee.

Despite that positive movement, we did not receive state funding last year, and today, I want to bring the same request back to you, and ask that you once again include this request in your priorities in your memo to the Appropriations Committee. We have one tweak to our request this year – we have been advised by a member of that committee to ask for \$500,000 for FY2019, which would cover the first two years of our need, and then we can come back to report results before requesting any more funding.

I'd like to give you an update about what we've been doing since I talked to you last year. We have had a lot of forward movement, and think our case is even stronger now for the state to support our work to bring HEAT Squad to all of the counties.

First, I'll remind you that HEAT Squad started in Rutland County as a pilot project with a grant from the U.S. Department of Energy. The DOE wanted to know why homeowners did not do efficiency work in their homes, and what we found is that the critical component to successful completion of home efficiency measures is homeowner support and customer service. We know that when a homeowner gets an audit and then has professional support to prioritize projects, secure funding, hire contractors and manage the project, they are much more likely to complete their projects. These services are exactly what HEAT Squad provides.

We hit that "sweet spot" of homeowners who make 80-120% of median income. Although we serve all Vermonters, the majority of our clients are in that range. The homeowners are responsible for paying for the work done to their home, but we help them to secure loans, apply for incentives and rebates available and plan for their budgeting.

Of course, our DOE grant has since ended, but we have kept HEAT Squad going, and have since brought HEAT Squad to all of the southern counties of Vermont (Rutland, Addison, Bennington, Windham, Windsor). In addition to helping homeowners with their projects in these counties, we have added \$12million in contractor revenue in these counties, because our work with homeowners brings business to the contractors that we work with. We also train contractors to work with homeowners, which builds their business even more.

I have another handout here, which shows some of our results and services. We focus on providing advice, guidance and professional help throughout the process, from the audit to the completion of the services.

Now, to tell you what we've done since last year.

In the past year we have merged our Rehab program with HEAT Squad so all customers, whether they call for rehab services or efficiency improvements, get a comprehensive home assessment that covers anything in their home having to do with health (mold or varmints); safety (lighting on the back hallways or broken porch steps); efficiency (air sealing and insulation) and aging in place improvements (grab bars in the bathroom and door sills that can trip someone).

Next, we have a new partnership with Rutland Regional Hospital to provide doctor-prescribed improvements to homes, paid for by funds from the hospital. For instance, a child who had what was considered to be the worst asthma case in the state was about to move into a home that had been given to their family. The home had terrible conditions, and we made significant improvements, so that child can be healthier. Right now, we have 50 patients in this pipeline.

Next, we are moving into the Northeast Kingdom because we received a Northern Borders Regional Commission grant. We are just starting this work – in fact, we are spending the next two days in the Kingdom.

We are also doing work to replace older woodstoves in Vermont homes with either pellet stoves or EPA approved wood stoves, with some funding that we have received for this purpose. With another pot of funding, we can also fix chimney and other issues associated with the stoves.

We are also excited about a brand new do-it-yourself solar project that is being piloted in Puerto Rico right now. We will be bringing it to Vermont soon. This project will allow homeowners to install their own solar panels with just a little support from us and from the company that makes the kits.

In summary, we ask for this committee's support for our state funding request to bring the HEAT Squad program to all counties in Vermont over the next several years. Thank you for considering our request, and we are available to answer any questions you might have.