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Wednesday, March 29, 2017

Senate Appropriations Committee

Re: S.100

Dear Senators Kitchel, Nitka, Sears, Star, McCormick, Ashe and Westman:

I am writing in response to an article in today's VT Digger, which indicates that you are not planning to move forward with S.100, the housing bill, due to concern over whether the governor would veto the funding mechanism.

I am writing in support of the concept that we desperately need more affordable housing options in Vermont. In the end, increasing the affordable housing supply would save money in the cost of temporary housing in hotels, allowing for reunification of more families in the juvenile court process, and in the protection of youth and low-income people from the myriad effects of being inadequately housed.

At a time when federal funding for low-income housing is threatened, and where federal funds are prohibited from housing anyone with a history of drug abuse (or even their families), state-supported affordable housing is essential. We can't reduce substance abuse if people coming out of treatment programs are just ending up couch surfing because they're ineligible for housing assistance.

In my work as the Juvenile Defender in Addison County, I can't tell you the number of times that children come into custody or remain in custody in cases where the parents' homelessness is one (never the sole) issue. Children living in barns, unheated campers and couch surfing are common. Usually the parents have issues with mental health or substance abuse, which affects their ability to maintain housing. However, even after they get treatment, they are frequently unable to obtain and maintain the housing they need for reunification due to limitations of Section 8 vouchers. In addition, the cost of housing in Addison County often prohibits a family having employment from paying market rents that are often \$1200 or more for a two-bedroom apartment, without utilities.

I know that S. 100 primarily provides for the growth of housing stock available to low income and median income families. But growing that housing stock is so important.

I had a disability client who lived in his truck and a tent with his dog for 3 years until his disability came through, and even then had difficulty finding affordable housing, given his monthly disability income. Often my disability clients are co-housed with parents or other relatives because they cannot afford to live on their own. SSI benefits are currently \$767/month. SSDI benefits are higher, but, depending on work history, are almost always less than \$2000 per month. Unless you are lucky enough to live in an income-based housing situation, there is no way to be securely housed on such an income.

It is essential to increase the housing stock available to very low income Vermonters and to median income Vermonters. Lack of secure housing increases criminal activity. (I remember one client who, in November of each year, would commit a criminal offense that would result in pre-trial detention for the winter months. He would make no effort to bail himself out, figuring that 3 squares and a roof in the winter was better than being homeless. He would plead guilty and get a fine or probation in the spring, and repeat the same business each year.) As we are acutely aware, the cost of housing inmates, inside and outside Vermont, is exorbitant.

In sum, please reconsider supporting S.100. It is but one small step in addressing issues that ultimately cost the State much more money in terms of the child welfare system, corrections, substance abuse and mental health hospitalizations and treatment.

For those of you who don't know me, I am also sending my latest resumé. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Pamela A. Marsh, Esq.