

**TESTIMONY PRESENTED
TO THE
SENATE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
AND
HOUSE GENERAL, HOUSING, & MILITARY AFFAIRS
BY
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WINDHAM & WINDSOR HOUSING TRUST
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My name is Connie Snow, and I'm the Executive Director of the Windham & Windsor Housing Trust. On behalf of the Vermont Housing and Conservation Coalition, thank you so much for making time today. While I understand that you don't make appropriations decisions in these committees, we hope you'll support the Governor's recommendation of \$16.3 million for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, as well as support his proposal to use a portion of this to make a significant investment in housing through a revenue bond.

A little bit about my own organization. Over a 29-year period, Windham & Windsor Housing Trust has created and preserved the affordability of 833 homes and apartments, serving over 1,400 low and moderate income residents of southeastern Vermont. What began as a neighborhood effort to preserve the affordability of three apartment buildings on Canal Street in Brattleboro has grown to become one of Vermont's most trusted and successful community development organizations.

I know many of you have seen the recent presentation of the Roadmap to End Homelessness in Vermont by the Corporation for Supportive Housing. That Roadmap concludes that we have a pressing need in Vermont to increase the supply of affordable housing, as well bring the model of Permanent Supportive Housing to scale—producing 180 new units of supportive housing over a 5 year period.

I'd like to describe how we came to believe that permanent supportive housing is critically needed, as well as describe a project we have in our pipeline right now.

Following the economic downturn, we saw and experienced first-hand demographic and market changes in our region. Almost two thirds of the renters in the regional centers we serve are eligible for our housing. Even more troubling, the poorest cohort of renters, those earning less than 30% of area median income, is growing the fastest. Housing opportunities for special needs populations are extremely limited. Combine these realities with a 1% multifamily vacancy rate statewide—and .05% vacancy in affordable housing— and you have a recipe for a crisis.

Clearly there is a need for more affordable housing across the income spectrum. In recent years, however, we realized that we lacked a model for serving the most vulnerable: the chronically homeless and those living with mental illness or addiction.

While we have integrated many homeless individuals and families successfully into our properties through the years, we now understand that the most vulnerable individuals need either longer term or more intensive wraparound services to succeed.

The evidence-based model of permanent supportive housing provides us a path forward, one with a proven track record. As you know, it is a “housing first” model, with no preconditions for securing housing, no time limits on residency, and –most often—on site supportive services.

Last summer, Windham & Windsor Housing Trust secured an option on a motel in Brattleboro, the Lamplighter Motel. We are proposing to convert this extended-stay motel into 22 micro-apartments, 350 square feet each, 11 of which will be targeted to homeless and vulnerable populations. We will be constructing a new community building on site, with a community living room and kitchen, as well as meeting and office space for social service providers.

We plan to partner with Healthcare and Rehabilitation Services, which will provide mental health and substance abuse counseling, as well as Groundworks Collaborative, our local shelter, which will provide life skills, financial literacy, and employment coaching and referral.

We will work with service providers and hospitals in town to identify the most vulnerable, using a so-called “vulnerability index”, so that these 11 apartments will serve those who need it the most, those facing complex challenges including mental illness, chronic health conditions, trauma, or other serious or persistent issues.

I’ve seen the results when people get the support they need and deserve, and could relate many stories. We’ve had applicants living in cars or in the woods, trying to manage chronic health conditions or their mental illness. And, we’ve seen how life changing it is to secure a safe apartment along with supportive services.

If all goes as planned, we will close on the Lamplighter property (to be known as Great River Terrace) in May, begin construction in August, and be ready for occupancy in the spring of 2018. I wish we had this housing 5 years ago. There is a desperate need, and it represents an unmet need in regional centers across our corner of the state and I’m sure across Vermont. Constrained resources have made it difficult to piece together the three legged stool of funding that we need for these projects: capital for the development of the housing, funding for the supportive services, and rental assistance. We have the know-how in Vermont and the partnerships in place to solve homelessness. Governor Scott’s proposed revenue bond, along with leveraged resources, would allow us to move forward with this critically important work, as well as to address the shortage of housing in Vermont.

Permanent supportive housing is cost effective, saving the state money by reducing the cost of homelessness. It has been inspiring to see how Connecticut, which made a commitment to supportive housing 10 years ago, has all but eliminated the use of motels for the homeless. The supportive housing model has a documented track record of ending homelessness while encouraging individuals to make their own choices to get healthy, quit drugs or alcohol, and often to find employment; in short, to live stable and healthy lives and participate in community life.

Our community development work in Vermont has been accomplished in partnership with the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, and made possible by the funding that you have approved. While understanding the challenges, I am heartened by the roadmap to end homelessness, and by the Governor's proposal to make this tremendous investment in housing through a revenue bond. The proposed resources will go a long way to create opportunities for Vermonters, as well as to build healthy, inclusive communities. Thanks so much for your time and attention to the very important matter.