

Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs
January 31, 2017

The mental health and addiction recovery services that the Clara Martin Center provides to community members in our region at times only tell part of the story. Addressing issues of mental health wellness and ongoing sobriety is so often contingent on addressing the system and supports around the individual, including the issue of stable and affordable housing, and for those that find they need additional support to live independently, access to quality residential services.

Homelessness or unstable housing is a significant social determinant of health. Homeless individuals may be predisposed to poor health outcomes due to poor living conditions and food insecurity. For those with mental health concerns, the issue of housing is even more challenging. As health care reform discussions continue and new models of service delivery are developed, the ability for people to access stable housing needs to be part of the conversation.

So often the work that we do with clients can come down to supporting them to make the best decision out of poor choices, such as food over clothing, housing over medication, choices no one should face as they try and make a life in Vermont. The values that we have as a state around caring for our neighbor and supporting diverse communities of individuals to thrive in our rural areas, can be threatened without adequate access to housing that can be afforded by all that want to live and contribute back to the state. Transient housing affects the ability to find gainful employment, support local businesses, and establish safe communities. For those with children, it affects the development of strong school communities, and can have effects on the child's social and emotional development.

The unintended consequences of not addressing and providing a path for adequate housing plays out in communities in higher utilizations of costly emergency department and inpatient care visits, greater criminogenic behavior and legal issues, and greater family instability, that can result in an increase in families referred to DCF, emergency services, etc.

The Clara Martin Center has been lucky to work over the past year with community partners such as the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, local Community Development organizations, and the Division of Historic Preservation to develop additional housing units in Orange County. Without the support of the varied organizations that are working on this project with us, we wouldn't be able to move forward with our plan to rehab a currently vacant building into additional affordable housing units for our area, even though the demand for supportive housing remains high, and will only continue as access to housing supports from the federal government continue to dwindle to the point they become non-existent.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with the committee yesterday, and consideration of these remarks as you continue the work you do to address issues at the state level this legislative session.

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