

Good Morning. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on H. 132. My name is Foresta Castañeda and I am the Transitional Housing Coordinator at WomenSafe, a social service non-profit working towards the elimination of physical, sexual and emotional violence through direct service, education and social change. WomenSafe serves all of Addison county and the town of Rochester, VT and is a member program of the VT Network. I hold an MSW degree from UVM and have worked at WomenSafe in various capacities for the past 13 years.

In my role, I regularly advocate with landlords on behalf of survivors in order to address problems or barriers that they are experiencing in housing or to address safety needs due to domestic, sexual violence and stalking. I frequently work with survivors facing housing discrimination and threat of eviction due to domestic violence.

Many survivors are reluctant to disclose to a landlord in order to get permission for a lock change or ask to break a lease in order to seek safety, for fear that the landlord will retaliate against them or try to evict them. Survivors seeking new housing are also extremely concerned about whether their experiences with domestic, sexual violence or stalking will prevent them from qualifying for new housing and many experience discrimination.

This is especially difficult for rural survivors living in small towns where everyone knows each other, as it can be difficult to find an unbiased landlord in an already extremely tight rental market. Often survivors will choose to move to another town to try to escape this discrimination. This is often a difficult choice that may negatively impact the survivor and their family in other ways, such as needing to change schools, longer commutes to work or childcare, or becoming disconnected from their friends, family and community.

Recently we worked with a survivor who sought a lock change after experiencing stalking at her residence. She sought permission from her landlord and was refused so she sought our assistance. After much advocacy with the landlord and our organization offering to pay for the lock change, the landlord still refused to allow it.

This was extremely invalidating to this survivor, as she did not feel supported or believed. She felt powerless that she had tried to seek safety from the stalking and re-gain some control over the situation, only to have the landlord derail her efforts.

If the protections in H. 132 had been in effect, this survivor would not have needed the permission of the landlord to move forward with the lock change. She would have been able to make the arrangements or seek community assistance to pay for it and schedule the work herself. Then she could simply notify and provide keys to the landlord after the fact, without the landlord being able to interfere with or prevent it from happening.

WomenSafe (or Vermont Center for Crime Victim's Services) will financially support survivors we work with when they are seeking lock changes (which is usually to their own apartment only, rather than the whole building). It is extremely rare for a survivor to be looking to the landlord to cover that cost.

Without a specific law in place, deciding whether to grant safety accommodations or initiate an eviction based on domestic, sexual violence or stalking is solely at the discretion of the landlord, who often has little knowledge or understanding of the barriers that survivors experience. The survivors in these

situations, may, or may not have the benefit of an advocate to assist them in navigating their rights and options.

Passing H. 132 would ensure that all survivors in the state are afforded the same rights and access to housing opportunities in Vermont; and that their ability to be housed or maintain existing housing would not be contingent on the individual views of the landlord or the level of advocacy that they are able to access. H. 132 would provide protected status to survivors of domestic, sexual violence and stalking, and provide clear guidance and recourse against landlord discrimination and retaliatory landlord practices. H. 132 also outlines a clear process by which survivors can legally access lock changes or request an early termination of lease due to safety needs. It would also require landlords to keep information about a tenant's survivor status confidential. These are necessary and needed protections that will go far towards increasing survivor's rights, safety and access to housing. I urge you to support H. 132. Thank you.