

Testimony – Eileen Peltier

February 13, 2020

House General

Bill 783

Thank you Chair Stevens

Thank you for hearing this bill and for all you do for Vermonters and AH.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify again

Thank you Rep Killacky and Rep O’Sullivan

RR’s and the safe expansion of RR in Vermont is a cornerstone of Vermont’s recovery system. We have invested deeply in our HUB and SPOKE. Time to invest (no money with the bill) in our citizens’ recovery. At Recovery Day yesterday, we celebrated the strength of the VRN, a program in Rutland working with prisoners with SUD before and after their release and several other innovative programs. That said, what we heard over and over yesterday was the need for housing and employment.

Standing up a statewide network of RR’s is our goal. We know we need something like 1,000 more beds (per the Housing: A Critical Link to Recovery Report). That is not going to happen organically with the many barriers to entry for potential operators. Last March, the Governor shared the report and we committed to creating a system that makes sense and addresses the barriers to entry.

We studied the need by community

We created a developer toolkit for communities. (They are hungry for RR’s)

We established VTARR

We educated the AH funders on the need to fund RR

We identified the need for a fund for rental assistance for first month’s rent (more on that in a minute)

And we identified this legislative bill as critical to removing the barriers for communities.

From Bennington to St. J, communities are working hard to meet the need for RR's.

This bill is important and urgent. Many, many Vermonters will benefit. We are experiencing an unprecedented crisis in SUD. It is time to act.

This bill has many benefits and imposes certain burdens on the operators.

First, it defines RR with detailed expectations around operational policies and uses NARR as a standard. It is true that if an RR chooses not to certify under NARR and/or chooses not to meet the requirements under the bill, they will not have access to any of the benefits of this bill and/or the benefits of VTARR certification. The approach of the bill is a big carrot. It is important to remember that the RR operators are asking for this bill. We are hearing from many of the RR operators and they want to certify. They are hungry for clarity around their operations and are excited about the technical support from VTARR. In Vermont, we are fortunate to have RR operators who are motivated by compassion for those in need and their desire to operate ethically. Right now, there is no clear direction for operators. This bill will fix this challenge.

Next, the bill addresses the zoning (single-family residential use). This is a big deal and something that potential RR operators and communities are looking for guidance on. It will set the zoning standard across the state and will reduce long community debates over the opening of an RR in a community. Right now, the zoning question is a big barrier to the development of new RR that are urgently needed. I have communities around the state that are awaiting this clarity on zoning.

The bill provides clarity to operators and tenants on the temporary removal or termination of at tenant. Right now, RR operators for the most part do not consider their members' tenants. Landlord tenant law does not apply. Under the bill, RR residents are tenants. This is a big protection. Of

course, the bill has exceptions to landlord tenant law, but, it is important to remember we are bringing RR's under landlord tenant law with this bill.

RR's have unique aspects to their operations. One aspect that is driving much of the bill language is the critical need to create a home that is free of residents in active addiction. Again, right now there are no standards for removal of a RR resident. The bill defines the standard. I believe this standard strikes the right balance between protecting the individual tenant and protecting all the residents of the RR. This is not an easy balance to strike. As a state, we tend to be strong on individual rights. That is important. At the same time, we need to balance those rights with the rights of our citizens to live in a safe community. I believe the bill does an excellent job of both protecting individual rights and community rights.

Relative to the question of the scope of the application of the bill being restricted to RR's who choose to certify, I want to speak to the reasons an operator would want to certify.

Technical support, advocacy, protection from adverse State action due to removal of a resident, and guidance on best practices. All carrots for potential operators. A well, yesterday, the Governor announced the formation of the Jenna Fund. This fund will be administered by VTARR and will be only be available to VTARR certified RR's in the state. With help from VHFA, and funds from the FHLB, we seeded the fund at the VCF with an initial contribution of over \$100,000. Most people coming out of treatment do not have the funds to enter a RR. These funds will provide initial deposits and first month's rent for individuals entering an RR who have financial need. This is a huge boost to the operators as well, many of whom are covering those initial expenses.

In closing, I believe this bill provides the necessary clarity that individuals with SUD, RR operators and communities need to move forward on standing up a safe, effective network of RR's across Vermont. I believe it is urgent that we get this bill passed this session. In fact, I believe our citizens lives depend on it. Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify and thank you for your consideration of what I certainly appreciate is a complex bill. I am happy to answer any questions.