

Testimony for the Joint Hearing before House General & Human Services, VT Homelessness Awareness Day

Prepared by Christopher C. Brzovic

January 15, 2020

Hello, my name is Christopher Brzovic. I am the Coordinated Entry System Administrator for the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance, and I serve as the Chair of the Coordinated Entry Committee for the Alliance. I work at CVOEO in Burlington, which provides the administrative support for the Coordinated Entry System in Chittenden County. In 2014, I began my work on the ground in Burlington as an AmeriCorps service member through the CEDO We all Belong AmeriCorps program, serving as the coordinator for the greater Burlington 100,000 homes campaign, a volunteer-driven community outreach effort to assess the needs of people sleeping unsheltered. Since that time, I have led the effort to design, implement, and manage the Coordinated Entry process in Chittenden County. In this position, I am responsible for coordinating a diverse group of front-line service workers from multiple agencies and have been in charge of managing our by-name list of people experiencing homelessness, and reviewing and reporting community-level data on homelessness in Chittenden County on a monthly basis.

My testimony today is on the urgent need for permanent supportive housing, but more specifically, on the supportive services needed to pair with existing rental subsidy to permanently house our most vulnerable community members in Chittenden County. I am basing my assessment on the current data from our Coordinated Entry Master List (sometimes referred to as a By-Name List). This list is generated from our Coordinated Entry process and encompasses everyone in Chittenden County who has completed a CE assessment (which in Chittenden County is at least 90% of the total unhoused population). The list is up-to-date and reliable; it is a dynamic, living list updated in real-time, and it is person-specific, meaning it tells us who is currently homeless and what their current needs are. I am excited that we now have the ability to identify exactly who is in most urgent need of our support and what kinds of support they need, and we can do this at the community level with shared and reliable data.

In our weekly Community Housing Review meetings, meetings that bring together front-line staff from across multiple agencies including CVOEO, COTS, CHCB, Steps to End Domestic Violence, Pathways, Spectrum, and Anew Place, we have identified 45 individuals experiencing chronic homelessness who are stuck sitting on the list, unable to move into housing, because we do not have the service capacity to serve them in permanent supportive housing. These 45 individuals are the most vulnerable people without housing in our community and need supportive housing to exit homelessness. We know who they are, we have referred them to housing navigation supports, and we have implemented case conferencing strategies to collaboratively support them where we can; however, we continue to run up against the lack of capacity in the necessary resources to permanently house them, so they continue to languish in homelessness.

The need for additional PSH capacity as the main barrier to serving these 45 individuals is especially pronounced given the progress we have otherwise made in driving down chronic homelessness. We have been tracking our progress and reporting monthly data on homelessness in Chittenden County since September 2018, and our overall trend in chronic homelessness has been downward over the past year. This month, we are seeing the lowest numbers of chronically homeless individuals since we began reporting data. In fact, in September 2018 we saw 105 chronically homeless individuals on our By-Name List; that number is down to 83 this month (a 21% decrease over the past 16 months).

Our CoC has achieved this by working collaboratively through our Coordinated Entry System – we have moved to prioritize the chronically homeless among the single adult population for housing resources (we also have a prioritization for families and households fleeing DV), we have developed partnerships with housing providers including Champlain Housing Trust, Burlington Housing Authority, and Vermont State Housing Authority, to prioritize units and subsidy for people experiencing homelessness, and we have built solid collaborative relationships among our front-line staff to support each other's work and develop shared agreements on how to prioritize our mutual clients for limited resources. All this work in building relationships and infrastructure puts us in a good place to end chronic homelessness in Chittenden County - which makes up 35% of the total chronically homeless population statewide according to the 2019 PIT count - provided we have the necessary resources to do so.

What we need, most urgently, are supportive services to pair with existing rental subsidy. As the recent Report on the Specialized Housing Vouchers Working Group by AHS (November 15, 2019) has documented, we have rental subsidy through our federal CoC-PSH grants that is going underutilized in Chittenden County as in the Balance of State. According to the 2019 AHS Report, the Burlington Housing Authority had underutilized their CoC PSH shelter plus care subsidies by the equivalent of 27 vouchers in 2017-2018. The report points to the lack of supportive services to match the rental subsidy (required by the HUD CoC PSH grants) as a major reason for underutilization. We need to be able to fully utilize this rental subsidy to permanently house the most vulnerable. The benefit now is that we have a system of coordination that allows us to identify who is most in need of this particular resource and to prioritize referrals based on need.

We can quantify the services needed to serve the most vulnerable people experiencing chronic homelessness in Chittenden County. With an estimated staff to client ratio of 1:15 (appropriate for the level of services needed for this population), we would need, at a minimum, three new FTE positions to serve these 45 individuals in Chittenden County. This would roughly equate to an investment of 250,000 to 300,000 dollars. This cost would be offset by significant savings in emergency services. One relevant 2009 study of PSH effectiveness in Maine found the following significant cost reductions in community resources: 49% reduction in ER costs for PSH participants, 87% reduction in incarceration cost, 53% reduction in ambulance cost, and 51% reduction in cost of police interactions (“THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PERMANENT SUPPORTIVE HOUSING IN MAINE: A Review of Costs Associated with the Second Year of Permanent Supportive Housing for Formerly Homeless Adults with Disabilities,” October 2009)

However, I want to emphasize that this is only the minimum necessary to begin serving the most vulnerable and service-needy among our chronically homeless population in Chittenden County. The

other 38 chronically homeless individuals on our By-name list have been assessed to need fewer services in housing and can utilize Mainstream resources for housing subsidy; however, they will still need some housing retention supports. And I have only spoke about people experiencing chronic homelessness. There are an additional 36 households on our Master List who are not chronically homeless, but have scored very high on our vulnerability assessment. They will likely need robust housing retention supports to maintain housing stability. This aligns with the need for retention services in the Balance of State as well.

In closing, I would like to emphasize the enormous effort and hard work that has been put in on the ground throughout the state in serving those without housing and building effective systems of coordinated service delivery. I am confident with the right investments, we can make homelessness rare and brief in Vermont.

Thank you for listening to my testimony.