

January 16, 2019

TO: House General, House & Human Services

FROM: Renee Weeks, Director of Shelter & Clinical Services, Upper Valley Haven

RE: Homeless Awareness Day Testimony

Good morning. My name is Renee Weeks. I grew up in Vermont and have worked in Vermont for the past 20 years in the mental health, substance abuse, correctional treatment and housing service sectors. For the past eight years, I have been the Director of Shelter & Clinical Services at the Upper Valley Haven in WRJ, VT. The Upper Valley Haven is a non-profit, private organization that services people struggling with poverty by providing essential services such as food, shelter, education, service coordination and other support. The Haven is open 365 days per year and never charges for any of the services delivered. The agency serves more than 14,000 people annually, general in a 45-mile radius of WRJ. The Haven operated in 2017 with over 700 community volunteers and 50 community partnerships. I would like to thank you all for your support for funding programs that help create housing and alleviate homelessness in Vermont.

As part of my role at the Haven, I also have agreed to the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness representative in my community to lead the Point In Time Count on January 23rd. The annual Point in Time Count is an unduplicated statewide count of households experiencing literal homelessness. The Upper Valley Haven partners with the Hartford Police Department to do outreach to tent sites in the community. We have had this partnership for 2 years. It has been effective in helping people who are camping come into our Seasonal Shelter and/or emergency shelters. Many of the people staying in tents have mental health and substance abuse related issues and chose not to seek treatment. Most are chronically homeless and would benefit most from permanent supportive housing. The approach in our community has been to partner with the Hartford Police Department to provide safety checks, offer resources, and begin to make a connection or relationship with people so that when they are ready for help they know where to get it and feel comfortable doing so.

The Upper Valley Haven has found that it takes the three-legged stool approach to even get us close to ending homelessness in Vermont. We need the more housing stock. The vacancy rate in our area is less than 1.5%. We need affordable housing options, and voucher opportunities for those under certain income thresholds. Luckily, we have partnered with Twin Pines Housing on several projects. We also partnered with Bridge and Main through Bitteringer Development. We have found that housing developers and housing management companies working directly in partnership with service providers is most effective way to get and keep people housed. In both instances, Twin Pines and Bill Bitteringer of Bridge and Main secured the building and vouchers (which were funded), and the Haven offered to provide supportive services with very limited private funding. Supportive services to help keep our most vulnerable populations housed. The Family Supportive Housing Program which is funded by OEO, has had huge success supporting families in housing with high needs. In their most recent report,

they have shown that stable housing among the families was clearly linked to engagement in services. In addition, 90% of families served in the program statewide moved on from the program successfully.

I would like to highlight two important trends that many providers in the state are facing:

1. When people acquire housing vouchers, it is nearly impossible to find housing that falls within the range of the market rent guidelines. This supports our need for the bricks and mortar, and more realistic maximum rental cost guidelines set forth by voucher programs in Vermont.
2. Many of the vouchers in Vermont have a requirement of a support or service match. Examples include Vermont Rental Subsidy, Shelter Plus Care and Rapid Rehousing Vouchers. More and more we are seeing service capacity diminish in communities, so the vouchers cannot be used. Much of the time these are supportive series that are not funded by the State and are yet so essential to the success of our chronic need clients with high need for supportive services. We need to fund supportive services so capacity to provide services is increased.

Every Vermonter deserves a home. Every child deserves the stability of a "HOME." A home is more than a house. It is a place of safety and connection. We can look at the numbers of homeless people we "count" through the PIT, shelter stays, hotel stays, etc. This is not reflective of the true number of homeless families out there who are couch surfing with friends and family's members. The children in these families endure so much stress, lack of predictability, and trauma. We may not "count" them as homeless, but they are "HOME"less.

Thank you for your valuable time, consideration and service to the State of Vermont.

With Gratitude,

Renee Weeks

Director of Shelter & Clinical Services

Upper Valley Haven.