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February 26, 2019

The Honorable Thomas Stevens, Chair
House Committee on General, Housing and Military Affairs
Vermont Legislature
Statehouse
Montpelier, Vermont

RE: H.132 - An act relating to adopting protections against housing discrimination for victims of domestic and sexual violence

Thank you Chair Stevens and Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to provide testimony. My name is Bor Yang, and I am the Executive Director for the Vermont Human Rights Commission.

The Commission has jurisdiction to investigate claims arising out of the statute this bill seeks to amend, 9 V.S.A. §4503 – Unfair Housing Practices. The Commission strongly supports H.132, which would adopt protections against housing discrimination for victims of domestic and sexual violence.

Our mission as an agency is to promote full civil and human rights in Vermont. The Commission protects people from unlawful discrimination in housing, state government employment and public accommodations. It enforces these anti-discrimination laws through investigations, conciliations and litigation. The Commission provides education and training and develops and advances policy relating to the protection of the most vulnerable; those belonging in protected categories including women, children, persons of color, new Americans, persons with disabilities and members of our LGBTQIA community.

The Commission has achieved favorable outcomes for a variety of victims of housing discrimination. Some of these positive outcomes include the victim of discrimination being allowed to remain in his or her current housing, receiving money to help offset the costs the victim incurred by having to move, receiving an apology and more. Results of housing discrimination cases have also reached beyond the individual to include public interest benefits such as training for landlords, managers and staff and mandating landlords adopt and post fair housing policies. The Human Rights Commission looks forward to the opportunity to extend positive outcomes such as these to victims of abuse, sexual assault or stalking.

In addition to making victims of abuse, sexual assault or stalking part of Vermont housing discrimination law, H.132 would allow these victims the opportunity, if needed, to terminate

their rental agreements and to change the locks of their rental units. The Commission supports these additional provisions that will help to increase the safety of individuals and families facing situations of abuse, sexual assault or stalking.

The Commission would also support a further increase in protections for these victims. An additional issue that victims of domestic violence can face is being evicted from their homes for being involved in domestic disturbances, particularly ones that require police intervention. Evicting a victim or denying him or her housing because of calls to the police related domestic violence punishes victims for their abusers' actions. Allowing these evictions or denials can also deter victims from calling the police and seeking help. Thus, the Commission encourages the members of this Committee to amend the existing bill to include language prohibiting landlords, rental agencies and managers from utilizing police contacts as a non-discriminatory reason for an eviction, non-renewal of lease or denial of housing.

The Commission also supports clarifying the intended meaning of the word 'dependent' as used in H.132. It is our understanding that an amendment may be offered to clarify who is included as a dependent. Many cultures espouse and embrace a more expansive definition of family where we see extended relatives such as aunts, uncles, grandparents, non-blood related friends care for children without seeking legal custody in court. For all of these families, the Commission supports a broad interpretation of who can be included as a dependent in order to reflect the diversity of living situations that exist in our state.

Over a decade ago, Vermont recognized that housing discrimination is a problem for victims of domestic and sexual violence. In 2008, the legislature passed a bill to create a committee to study the issue. The Human Rights Commission worked as a member of the committee to survey housing authorities, property owners and domestic violence advocates.

The work of the committee confirmed that housing discrimination is a problem for victims of domestic and sexual violence in Vermont. For example, problems identified included being evicted, threats of being evicted and being denied housing as a result of being a victim. In addition to confirming the problem, the work of the committee identified potential responses and recommended that the legislature provide more protections for these victims.

On behalf of the Human Rights Commission, I encourage you to vote yes on H.132 to support protecting victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking from housing discrimination.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment.


Bor Yang
Executive Director and Legal Counsel