

Healthy Communities Vermont
St. Johnsbury, Caledonia & So. Essex County Working Group
c/o Joy Ely, Program Director
Northeast Kingdom Community Action Parent Child Center
115 Lincoln St
St. Johnsbury, VT 05819

February 12, 2020

House Committee on General, Housing, and Military Affairs
State of Vermont House of Representatives
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

RE: H. 739 An act relating to improving rental housing health and safety

Dear House Committee on General, Housing, and Military Affairs:

Thank you for your work regarding the laws and policies affecting rental housing in our state. We write in support of House Bill 739 because we need better support and funding for our rental housing inspectors.

We are a group of community leaders, housing agencies, advocates, and inspectors who meet regularly to develop a more effective and community based response to the bed bug infestations which are plaguing our communities. We believe that if we are to turn the tide on bedbugs, early detection and treatment is crucial. We need a much better supported, professional, efficient system of housing inspections in order to get there. We support H. 739 because it will create such a system.

Our group is based out of St. Johnsbury, focusing on Caledonia and southern Essex counties, but we are one of many such groups across the state that have come together following the Healthy Communities VT meeting in July of 2019. Healthy Communities VT is a learning community that was created to discuss and begin to organize solutions for families whose housing or health is at risk due to the presence of bed bug infestations and/or hoarding conditions. The inaugural meeting was organized by the Field Service Directors of the Vermont Agency of Human Services, co-sponsored by the Vermont Community Action Partnership, and was attended by 90 people from diverse organizations across Vermont. You can find out more about Healthy Communities VT here <https://www.healthycommunitiesvt.org/>

Our working group has set the following goals:

1. Improve understanding and knowledge about how to prevent, detect, and eliminate bedbugs by educating the public – including landlords, tenants, and agencies -- particularly by producing and distributing pamphlets and other educational materials.

2. Provide resources and support in the community to prevent, detect, and eliminate bedbugs.
3. Develop recommended processes and procedures for agencies, particularly those whose staff visit people in their homes.
4. Advocate for policy changes at the state and local level to change how we respond to bedbugs with the goal of reducing the frequency and severity of bedbug infestations in our community.

We have already made progress on several of these goals including developing an informational pamphlet, enclosed, and securing some initial seed funding from our local hospital, Northeastern Vermont Regional Hospital.

Both the Town Health Officer for St. Johnsbury, Fire Chief Jon Bouffard, and the Deputy Town Health Officer, Fire Marshal Andrew Buckley, are active participants in our working group, and they have been an invaluable resource to us. However, as we reach out to other Town Health Officers in our area, even just to offer training and support, we have become aware of how overburdened and under resourced our Town Health Officers are. They do not have the time and resources available to them to deal with bed bugs or even to get the training they need to understand the problem. It is not a lack of goodwill or interest on the part of Town Health Officers or the Department of Health. It is simply a lack of resources.

By far, the best time to treat a bedbug infestation is as early as possible. Early detection and treatment reduces the cost of treatment, the property loss and suffering of the infestation, and the likelihood that the infestation will spread. However, early treatment requires early detection, and early detection requires training and expertise. Moreover, convincing and supporting the affected parties to believe that the bedbugs are there and convincing and supporting everyone to do a thorough and effective treatment takes a lot of time and expertise. This is far too large a burden to place on the shoulders of Town Health Officers, most of whom are good-hearted, community minded volunteers or near volunteers.

We need professional inspectors who are trained and supported to find bedbugs early, direct affected parties to the right resources (and convince them to use them), and who have time and availability to spread accurate information through our community. This is why we support H. 739.

Bed bugs cause a lot of suffering in our community. We all know tenants who have suffered greatly – sleeplessness, pain, shame, property loss, and more. Our local landlords, both subsidized and not, report spending tens of thousands of dollars annually on treatment. Bed bugs have been found in our local businesses, non-profits, and government facilities causing both pain, fear, and huge expense. We understand that H. 739 is the culmination of many months of work of the Rental Housing Advisory Board, and we do not wish to comment on the entire scope of the bill, but we do wish to urge you to either support this bill or to find some other way to provide adequate resources to inspectors to allow for early detection and treatment of bed bugs. We believe this is crucial if we are to reduce the costs and suffering that bed bugs are currently causing in our community.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Joy Ely by MMG

Joy Ely, Program Director, Northeast Kingdom Community Action Parent Child Center

Maryellen Griffin, Staff Attorney, Vermont Legal Aid

Denise Goodwin, RN, Compliance and Staff Development Coordinator at Caledonia Home Health and Hospice

Susan A. Cherry, Executive Director, The Community Restorative Justice Center, Inc.