

House General

April 15, 2020

Testimony from Eileen Peltier

Good afternoon and thank you for you all that you do for Vermonters every day. To state the obvious, we are in some tough times. Or as the Buddhist tradition would say, we are **passing through** some difficulties. I prefer passing through to stuck, or buried under the weight of our misfortunes. Passing through suggests movement, and opportunity for change. A friend described it as follows: We are on a fast moving lifeboat, there are in fact many lifeboats, bouncing over rapids. We have left our tranquil, albeit very imperfect lake and we are heading to a brand new place. We have two missions. To ensure as many as possible make the journey successfully and to ensure we land in a better place.

One thing we know about viruses is that they attack our vulnerable spots. They look for weak spots and head straight there. We also know that systems are only as strong as the weakest component. This pandemic began as a medical event. Today, we understand that beyond the medical event there is a much larger socio-economic event already overhead. Vulnerable components of our socio-economic system in Vermont like rural hospitals, small family-owned business, seniors and young families struggling to make ends meet, and our housing infrastructure are the points of access for this viral economic event. It is this socio-economic event that will strain our resources and challenge our values.

Interestingly, early on the medical event required we address homelessness in order to protect all of us. We were told to stay home, stay safe, but as we know some 1200 Vermonters didn't have a home to stay safe in. With swift action, we housed nearly our entire homeless population. In Washington County, we housed 236 people including 44 children in 7 different hotels. We immediately set up a system to feed everyone three meals a day. We did incredible work to flatten the curve and it appears it is working.

You've asked me to speak to the current state of the hotels and the people there. First, some good news. People have a roof over their head and a warm bed and a shower. They have three meals a day. Some are connected to the state's support system for the first time. In Washington

county, we are rapidly doing intakes of many new individuals and families for our coordinated entry program. We very much believe that right now we have a unique opportunity to work with this population on their longer term needs. Many individuals that are homeless have substance use and/or mental health problems. By connecting now to each guest in the hotel, individuals can be referred to the necessary providers that can support their individual needs. We should be funding this services right now so as not to miss an opportunity to connect homeless individuals to the support they need to move forward during and after this crisis.

Along with these successes, our hotel system of housing the homeless is facing some steep challenges. The state and service providers are in discussions to strategize solutions. In Washington County, we are having success at the Econolodge which is filled with people coming from the shelters and whom are familiar with the rules associated with being in shelter. GSH is managing that site. At the other hotels, things are considerably different. On April 3, the WNOCC-RRCC sent a memo to the state to share our urgent concern that the Hilltop, where some 89 people including 40 or so children are currently housed was a hot mess and could become a hotspot.

The state responded quickly and agreed to fund GSH to provide services at the Hilltop. Almost two weeks later, we are still very concerned. Per Rick DeAngelis, GSH ED, "the situation at the Econolodge is good but not at the Hilltop Inn. GSH recently established an office there with two 24/7 staff and they have the cooperation of the motel management. However, there has been extensive disregard of their role and no way to enforce consequences for unsafe or inappropriate behavior. A recent incident in which a guest assaulted a motel staff person and retained her room illustrated this. GSH needs to be able to implement a set of rules that are appropriate for these semi-congregate settings given the public health situation and the Governor's Stay at Home Order. They need to be able to back up enforcement with the forfeiture of the room. Rick also asked for a security presence working in concert with the Berlin Police. These request are being considered but it seems unlikely that rules will be changed due to the need to respect individual rights.

I would imagine there are similar challenges in at least some settings across the state. The need to address immediate health and safety concerns is important and urgent. We don't want to end up housing and feeding 1200 people with a system that is not safe either from a COVID-19

hotspot or from more typical safety concerns in these types of settings. So, I think it is reasonable at this point to say, everyone is in the lifeboats but some are having a tougher ride than others and we are certainly not down the river yet.

In terms of the larger goal to end up in a better place, I am not aware of any significant planning as of yet. Some of the pre-COVID-19 discussions about restructuring the GA Voucher program may be a place to start. First and foremost, we have an issue with access to affordable housing due to a huge lack of housing vouchers. Rick reports that 85% of the 161 households in motels right now in Washington County are singles or childless couples. It is too hard for these people to get into low cost, simple, safe housing. They don't fit into the federal voucher programs that often have challenging guidelines. As well, they may have a challenging history as a tenant and/or criminal background that can make it challenging to either get into or more often stay in housing.

The next challenge to housing the currently homeless population is funding for services at the housing site. Currently, 19% of Downstreet's portfolio serve previously homeless folks. For some, we have some case management but most do not have services provided at home. For many, housing was the leg up they needed and they are doing well. For others, successfully staying housed is a real challenge. It is likely that the homeless in hotels are in this second category and will need much more than four walls and a roof to stay successfully housed.

Supply of safe, decent, affordable housing is a big challenge in many areas of the state. Our statewide vacancy rate is very low. Some of this is due to the need for new construction, some is due to apartments being repurposed into Airbnb or high end apartments that are unaffordable for many Vermonters. Regardless of the root causes, the challenge for the currently homeless population is primarily vouchers and services and for some, challenging, risky behavior that results in a removal from an apartment. One solution Downstreet is trying related to the behavior challenge is to provide the tiny, micro homes where an individual has their own home and is less likely to cause safety concerns with the other tenants in the housing community. As well, Permanent Supportive Housing like Great River Terrace in Putney or Beacon Place in Shelburne are working in some areas but are unlikely sustainable without the vouchers and services.

To some degree, there will always been a need for emergency shelter. We need to support our emergency shelter system better. According to Rick, the current situation is highlighting the need to rebuild the emergency

housing/homelessness system (at least in Washington County). He states that, “we have insufficient funding to operate effectively. GSH must raise 1/3 of its operating budget in private donations, this is too much for a small organization in a rural county. As well, there is insufficient technical assistance for best practices, our facilities are inadequate and there are very few easily accessible step-up options available for those who have entered the system to get to permanent housing.

To recap, the areas we need assistance include:

- Rules for homeless staying in hotels
- Funding for enhanced services at the hotels to address compliance, safety and root causes of homelessness (WCMHS staff)
- A revamp of the GA voucher program
- More project-based vouchers in the state affordable housing system
- Funds for services at housing sites
- Funds for innovative solutions like the tiny, micro homes
- A revamp of the emergency shelter system

It is my understanding that the current timeline is to end the GA vouchers on May 15th. It is my assumption and hope that the state will be convening a group tasked with defining the future path for the homeless population in hotels if in fact, it has not already happened. In my mind, this is a critical next step as we transition from the medical event to the socio-economic event before us now.

I recognize the huge challenges before you all as you begin to understand the financial impact of COVID-19 on our state’s financial health. I thank you for your diligence in serving Vermont and for your commitment to keeping Vermont healthy in the coming weeks and months.

In closing, I want to share a very brief quote from Arundhati Roy, an Indian author who recently wrote about the impact of COVID-19 in India. She says, “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or, we can walk through lightly with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions.