

Where There's a Will - and a Commitment - There's a Way to End Homelessness

Homelessness has been stopped in its tracks in Brattleboro. As I write this, there is not a single person that I am aware of that does not currently have shelter. This is an incredible achievement. What's more incredible is that it was accomplished within the last 30 days.

As we saw COVID-19 advance toward Vermont, we at Groundworks Collaborative worked closely with our State partners to establish and enact guidance that eventually led to everyone that was without housing, or who was precariously housed, being able to access local motel rooms. It is quite remarkable that a vision Groundworks has held for our community—that everyone has their basic needs met with dignity—has become a reality during this crisis. This need not be an anomaly.

Groundworks's staff have answered the call when needed most and I have to share my deep appreciation for their work—especially as they put themselves and their families at risk to come to work each day. Without them, we would not be able to be so effectively meeting our community's basic needs.

COVID is teaching us many lessons—lessons that stretch beyond the direct impacts of what effective and well informed leadership looks like in times of crisis. One of these lessons is that we do have the ability to house everyone in our community.

I have said for years that solving homelessness is not rocket science. It is not a complex enigma. We know how to solve homelessness. Homelessness is solved when we have ample housing stock coupled with rental subsidies and supportive services when needed. What has been lacking is the will and commitment to bring sufficient resources to bear to move from a position of mitigating homelessness to functionally ending it.

This is the time of year that the Seasonal Overflow Shelter (SOS) typically closes. In past years when we close the SOS, the only support we're able to offer is handing out tents to people that have no other options for shelter. While we're glad to be able to provide a tent, the process of closing causes anguish to clients and staff alike. It defies both logic and compassion to turn people out of a perfectly good shelter to ask them to camp somewhere in the community—most likely illegally—because of a lack of funding for year-round shelter.

As Vermont has been busy in successfully flattening the curve, we're entering a time when the broader conversation is shifting from surge and isolation to plateau and reopening. And so we find ourselves at a juncture where we can get this right or wrong—dignity for all or inequality for many.

We have seen light in this dark time and I hope, along with everyone who has worked tirelessly to provide for others in this crisis, that we won't return to "normal." Now is the time to make permanent what we have shown to be possible.

During this crisis, getting people experiencing homelessness into housing is a priority. COVID has highlighted that our entire community's vulnerability is directly connected to the vulnerability of any of its parts. This was true before COVID and will be true after. As we rebuild and reopen our communities—with caution and hope—let's act upon the lesson that this unprecedented time has taught us: taking care of each of us is the best way to take care of all of us.

It is not merely enough to survive this. We are given opportunities to recreate and reimagine communities—what was once thought impossible is not only possible but actually happening. Just as some plants only grow in the space of wildfire, so do the seeds of a community where everyone has housing in the wake of COVID.

Tell your legislators you're not satisfied with a return to the status quo. Right now, we are proving that we can do better. It's not a question of how we're going to solve homelessness, it's a question of when there will be allocated resources and the political will to get it done.

Find contact information for your legislators at: legislature.vermont.gov/people/

Josh Davis is the Executive Director of the Brattleboro-based Groundworks Collaborative—an organization of dedicated people working passionately each day to meet people's basic needs with dignity.