

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to share a perspective from Brattleboro. I'm Josh Davis, Executive Director of Groundworks Collaborative. We are *an organization of dedicated people working passionately each day to meet people's basic needs with dignity*. Our services include a 30-bed year round shelter, 33 bed seasonal overflow shelter, a day shelter, food shelf, case management and representative payee services. In essence, we provide food, shelter and supportive services to our neighbors in need.

I'm here today to share about what has transpired in the last couple of months in the Brattleboro area, and provide a vision for how we can take the most impactful steps towards ending homelessness.

In the middle of March—as covid was descending on Vermont—we completely changed our service delivery model with the support and guidance of our incredible State partners. We closed our Seasonal Overflow Shelter and moved people into motels, we closed our Day Shelter, and we reduced the number of people in our year-round shelter so that there is now just one household per room, and we closed the food shelf to walk-in visitors and started making emergency food deliveries all over Windham County.

Presently, we are supporting 135 adults and 16 children in 4 different motels in Brattleboro, which is about 4 times the number we typically support in the Seasonal Overflow Shelter. We are also supporting 1,300 people in 965 households with emergency food—that's twice as many households as would typically be visiting our food shelf in a month.

The response from Groundworks staff has been nothing short of extraordinary. They have shown up each day throughout this crisis assuming risk to themselves and their families to ensure we could continue to meet the basic needs of the people we serve. I would like to underscore the excellent work of Groundworks' staff and also staff across the state that continue to show up to make sure everyone has the shelter and support they need.

As I wrote in an article last week - Homelessness has been stopped in its tracks in Brattleboro and throughout Vermont! This is an incredible achievement. What's more incredible is that it was accomplished within 30 days. This need not be an anomaly in Vermont's history.

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 will not return to “normal.” Now is the time to make permanent what we have shown to be possible. COVID is teaching us many lessons—One of these lessons is that we *do* have the ability to house everyone in our community. We have often said that solving homelessness is not rocket science - not a complex enigma to figure out. Rather what is required is the will and investment to provide ample housing, subsidies and supportive services - the three legged stool metaphor that describes bedrock the Housing First model.

We’re entering a time when the conversation regarding COVID-19 is shifting from surge and isolation, to plateau and reopening. And so we find ourselves at a crucial juncture for what comes next. A juncture where planning for next steps must be led by the value of dignity for all.

Now - We’re faced with the question of what do we do next with the scores of people that are in motels throughout Vermont. As we have been looking at this question of what's next for Brattleboro, the first thing we were struck by is that—even if everyone in the motels had access to a housing subsidy—we don’t have the housing stock available to meet the demand. At last check, Windham and Windsor Housing Trust had only 5 vacancies in Brattleboro, which is an indicator of the extremely low vacancy rate here.

The question then evolved to: How do we quickly bring 50 - 70 units of housing online in the next few months? Elizabeth Bridgewater, Executive Director at Windham & Windsor Housing Trust, and I started to explore this question and quickly the conversation turned to talking about existing properties that already have that number of units. This ultimately led to the idea of purchasing a motel and continuing with the model that we’ve successfully been operating through our COVID response.

As I have learned, housing development is a long process that moves in months and years—not days and weeks. Building new housing could not be a short-term solution, but a motel purchase could offer the number of units needed for a rapid response permanent supported housing solution.

We have identified potential motel sites, and looked at some back of the envelope costs to try and get a better understanding of what this idea would entail. As we’re thinking about capital investment, I would also note that a key to this model is the supportive services that are coupled with the housing. Groundworks and Windham & Windsor Housing Trust have forged a strong partnership and gained invaluable knowledge through our work together at Great River Terrace: a 22-unit, permanent

supported housing community for individuals who had previously experienced chronic homelessness. The key to the success of this project is the supportive services. The services need to be viewed as just as crucial as the capital investment and be included in the conversation at the inception of the idea.

The concept of purchasing a motel raises a number of questions including, but not limited to:

- How do we sustain such a model?
- Will this operate like emergency housing or will it be a permanent supported housing project?
- What are the housing needs of people in the motels right now?
- What are number of units do we ultimately need?
- What will housing needs look like in the next few months as the impacts of Covid continue to be realized?

To answer these questions, we need more time. And while we are taking the time to answer these questions, let us first lead with the goal of not releasing people into our communities without housing and supports.

At this point we don't have a clear understanding of when the emergency motels will begin to unwind, but I would advocate that we do everything in our power to make sure we are not releasing hundreds of people back into homelessness on our streets or to unsafe and unsustainable housing situations. Declaring a timeline would be extremely helpful to clients that are incredibly anxious about the uncertainty of how long this support will last.

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 it's actually happening.

Thank you and I'm happy to take questions.