



## Testimony to House Committee on Health Care

TO: Chairman Lippert and Members of the House Health Care Committee  
FROM: Molly Dugan, SASH Director, Cathedral Square  
DATE: February 14, 2019

My name is Molly Dugan and I am the Director of the statewide SASH (Support and Services at Home) program. Cathedral Square, my employer, is responsible for statewide administration of the SASH program which is funded primarily by federal Medicare funds by way of the All Payer Model. SASH has been in existence since 2011 and is operated by the network of affordable housing providers (including all public housing authorities) in our state and embeds a care coordinator and wellness nurse in the affordable housing community to provide person-directed services and support in full partnership with existing community service organizations such as the Area Agencies on Aging and Home Health network. We serve approximately 5,000 older adults and adults with disabilities.

I am here today to underscore the severity of suicide among the primary population that we serve with SASH-older adults - and explain how we are using our statewide platform to provide improved access for help for those with suicidal ideation and help prevent mental health crises.

### **Suicide and older adults- the facts.**

I have provided a short power point that goes into more detail on the alarming data regarding suicide risk and deaths among older adults. In summary:

- Older adults have high rates of suicide and Vermont suicide death rates for older adults are in some cases alarmingly higher than US rate (age range 70-74 stands out).
- Males, aged 70-74 have the highest suicide death rates in the state.
- Older adults have a much higher suicide completion rate than other ages- more likely to use firearms, live alone.

### **Using the SASH program, available across the state, to provide timely support, referral and prevention programs.**

- SASH, available at 140 subsidized, affordable housing properties in every county of the state, has trained staff in evidence based mental health trainings such as Mental Health First Aid, U Matter Suicide Prevention, Gatekeeper, and Wellness Recovery and Action Planning (WRAP).
- SASH participants (over 5,000 statewide) are annually assessed with validated screens for risk of social isolation, loneliness, depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation.
- SASH staff build strong and trusting relationships with participants and make referrals for mental health assistance, provide regular in-person check-ins with high-risk participants and host support groups and educational events to combat stigma around seeking mental health support.
- All SASH panels have a Suicide Prevention Resource packet with the most-up-to date crisis numbers, advice on talking about suicide risk, and gunlocks.

- Strong partnership with Center for Health and Learning, DAIL, Area Agencies on Aging and Designated Community Mental Health Agencies.
- SASH housing sites often have community gathering spaces for prevention programs and activities. The need for suicide prevention is highlighted in the new State Plan on Aging and work is underway by DAIL to train more community service providers in the aging network in basic prevention.

In closing, the SASH program is committed to being part of the solution to preventing suicide deaths in our state. We will continue to collaborate fully and closely with all our existing partners and look for new ones to help us get to the ultimate and realistic goal of zero suicides in the state of Vermont. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or ideas. I can be reached at [dugan@cathedralsquare.org](mailto:dugan@cathedralsquare.org) or 863-2224.