

**Testimony on H.611, An Act Relating to the Older Vermonters Act**  
**Housing Human Services Committee**  
**February 6, 2020**

My name is Molly Dugan and I work for Cathedral Square as the the Director of the Statewide SASH program. Cathedral Square is a non-profit organization created in 1977 by the Cathedral Church of St. Paul in Burlington in order to build a residence for low income older adults on part of the church's property. That is our flagship property in downtown Burlington. Fast forward 43 years and Cathedral Square is an independent non-profit operating 29 affordable housing communities in Chittenden and Franklin counties. We provide high quality, affordable and service enriched housing to 1,200 people. While the majority of our communities are considered independent housing we do operate two licensed assisted living communities. One in our original property in Burlington and the other devoted to memory care for Medicaid recipients with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia in Williston – opened in 2017. I know you heard testimony just last week about the statewide SASH program so I will not repeat its description unless you have questions.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.611. I want to start by thanking Reps. Wood and Noyes for their commitment to sponsoring legislation that is derived from a process that was open and inclusive to so many interested persons and stakeholders. I would also like to thank the leadership of DAIL that coordinated the multi-sector and vocal workgroup through many, many meetings and which ultimately led to a consensus document of recommendations.

Cathedral Square and SASH strongly support H.611. I would like to frame my remarks around the very thoughtful and grounding comments that one of the working-groups' members provided early on in our meetings. This member, Hope Lindsay, is an older Vermonter, Cathedral Square resident and SASH participant.

Hope communicated to the working group that from her lived experience as an older Vermonter planning to remain living independently she sees three areas as absolutely necessary to reach a "desired state" for aging Vermonters. Her three absolutes included:

1. Ready access to basic services- housing, food and health care (including dental and vision). Currently Cathedral Square has a waitlist of over 1,300. Average wait is 3-5 years.
2. Financial Security – need for employment opportunities as Social Security is not adequate and cost of living is expensive in VT. A recent report published by UMass Boston cited that seniors in Vermont face one of the highest rates of financial insecurity in the nation.

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3. Quality of life – importance of access to volunteer opportunities, cultural opportunities, spiritual opportunities, civic opportunities and continuing education opportunities. Without these opportunities feelings of hopelessness creep in.

Hope's requirements for a "desired state" are indeed represented in the bill before you. Section 1, the Principles of System and Services, Supports and Protections for Older Vermonters includes a section on basic services such as housing and transportation, financial security, engagement and social connections. Overall the bill is broad stroke and aspirational and reflects the complexities, challenges, nuances and opportunities faced by older Vermonters.

One area I would like to highlight is the section that establishes an annual inflationary increase for providers of home and community based services. We strongly support this provision. Not only is an annual increase absolutely essential for providers like Cathedral Square to continue to serve our very low income residents of our two assisted living facilities it is essential for the home care providers that we partner so closely with in the SASH program and who serve our residents day in and day out with essential home care; keeping them from moving into higher level facilities. It is a fact that for our two facilities, the ACCS and ERC rates do not cover actual expenses. Last year we had significant losses at our Cathedral Square Assisted Living (CSAL) in Burlington and our Allenbrook Memory Care community in Williston. Importantly we are serving the most vulnerable populations at these two sites – 100% of our residents at Allenbrook Memory Care are on Medicaid and 82% of our residents at CSAL are on Medicaid. The workforce shortage is only going to exacerbate this gap between operating expenses and reimbursement rates. Every day we are competing for employees with organizations that are not affordable to the people we serve in our communities. They are able to offer \$2-\$4/hour shift differentials for evening, night and weekend shifts. We cannot compete and yet desperately need to in order to have the adequate, high quality staff that our residents deserve as they age in our state.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I strongly encourage you to support the passage of H.611.

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