

**April 26, 2019**  
**H. 132 Testimony**  
**Senate Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs Committee**

Thank you for allowing me to share my testimony in support of H. 132. I am here on behalf of Steps to End Domestic Violence. For 45 years, we have been proud to offer free, confidential and life-changing services to those in Chittenden County who have experienced domestic violence. We seek to create a community that is safe for everyone.

Our formal mission is to assist in the transition to a safe, independent life for all those who have been affected physically, sexually, emotionally, or economically by domestic abuse and to promote a culture that fosters justice, equity and safety. I wholeheartedly believe that H. 132 will be one more step towards of achieving this goal.

On a daily basis our advocates work with survivors who are weighing their options for achieving safety. Often they choose to come into Emergency Housing, for example, in Chittenden County we housed 227 adults and children in fiscal year 2018. This choice is always a difficult one, as it means moving into homelessness for an uncertain period of time, but it is often the only way the survivor can stay safe from their abuser.

The protections offered in H. 132 will allow more Vermonters affected by domestic violence, sexual violence and stalking to stay housed while also taking control back into their lives. The simple act of having the right to change the locks in their own home, can be life changing for a survivor of domestic violence.

Several months ago, Steps received a hotline call from a new caller. She had never reached out for support before, but started explaining that she had made the decision to end her three year verbally and emotionally abusive relationship two weeks prior. She explained that she had done “all the right steps”, making sure that she was considering her safety while extricating herself from the relationship. She said the night before she came home to find flowers and a note inside her locked house and that was when she knew that her abuser had at some point in their relationship made a copy of her key. She was crying and trying to make us understand that she hadn’t remember ever giving him a key of his own, but that he had had access during the course of their relationship. The survivor explained that she had not slept since getting the flowers and she was too embarrassed to tell any of her friends. She asked if she would come into shelter and was prepared to move out of her apartment and turn her life upside down.

The advocate asked some clarifying questions and eventually the conversation landed on a plan to reach out to the survivor’s landlord and to ask permission to change the locks. In the moment of fear and uncertainty this had not been viewed as an option by the survivor, but she was willing to try. The survivor hung up and called her landlord and luckily they were supportive and understanding and pointed out that they didn’t want to lose they stellar tenant.

At all of the Network Programs across Vermont we listen to survivors, we believe them, and we help them regain the power and control that was taken from them by their abuser. For this caller it was a simple fix that day. If her landlord had not been so understanding, that call could have

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taken a very different route. In a state where our housing markets are so tight that we regularly have 1% vacancy rates, many landlords don't take the time support their tenants in this way.

H. 132 would ensure that survivors of domestic violence, sexual violence and stalking can have the protections of knowing that their housing is not in jeopardy because they have experienced violence. And it is an important step forward for the safety and security of all Vermonters.

Submitted by  
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