

Thank you to the committee for allowing me to testify on H.132. My name is Shannon McMahon. I am the Advocacy Coordinator for Voices Against Violence, the domestic and sexual violence agency that serves Franklin and Grand Isle counties. I have worked as a domestic and sexual violence advocate in Northern-Middle Vermont for six years, and have witnessed many survivors experiencing barriers with their housing that further create harm and danger to the survivors and their families. Our advocates at Voices Against Violence are incredibly grateful that this bill is being proposed to protect survivors of domestic violence from discrimination and empower them (and their children) to carefully leave their dangerous situation and allow them to thrive in a new, safe environment.

There are many protections in H.132 that would benefit survivors of domestic and sexual violence. This bill would allow survivors and their children to leave a dangerous situation by being able to terminate a lease, without fear of financial distress, if the survivor feels as though they need to vacate for safety from imminent harm. Allowing a survivor to terminate in 30 days after providing the landlord with documentation will be incredibly helpful; it will be helpful to make sure communities and landlords are providing information about the program in their area to refer to for survivor supports and verification. I have worked with

many survivors that have needed to leave their market value rented apartments due to safety concerns that haven't been able to because of the repercussions, including losing a security deposit, having an additional charge, losing the landlord reference, and more. Vermont is experiencing a housing crisis, with extremely low vacancy rates.

The emergency housing and shelter resources for survivors and their children are extremely limited. There are many barriers around safety, navigating children's needs, and finding new safe and stable housing. A leading cause of homelessness for women and children is fleeing domestic violence. In our state, the amount of emergency and permanent housing available does not support the amount of people needing to flee. Also, when looking for market value housing, it is very competitive to find safe, secure housing, and survivors of violence are commonly not prioritized because they are not seen as good candidates to rent to because of these barriers and repercussions. The language in this bill empowers survivors to leave their dangerous situation in a way that will allow them to find safer housing or to make their current housing a safer environment, therefore eliminating the need for the survivor to move all together.

Another security measure that will keep survivors safe is the protected tenant being able to request permission of a landlord to install additional security measures, such as a security camera. Having protections that allow survivors to install cameras on the premises could not only be preventative (if the abusive partner is deterred from them), but it also is incredibly important to holding the abusive partner accountable through criminal charges. In a criminal proceeding, there is a burden of proof to hold the abusive partner accountable and keep the survivor safe. Implementing language that prohibits refusal of a survivor/tenants right to install additional security measures to keep themselves and their children safe. I recently worked with a survivor that fled their abusive partner and had a new apartment through a housing subsidy. The abusive partner was continuously stalking her, as well as coming to the front door to try and get into her home. The survivor wanted to file criminal charges for harassment, because a civil order had not worked in the past. The police did not have enough information to pursue an investigation, and the abusive partner kept coming to the new residence. The housing authority that she was residing under was able to promptly set up cameras that showed the abusive partner coming to the property, and the

survivor was able to find protection through the accountability of the crime the abusive partner was charged with. Because housing subsidies allow these similar protections that this bill is trying to implement, that survivor, and many others, have been able to find support and safety.

In the past I have worked with a survivor that fled high risk domestic violence with her children. When advocates talk about a survivor being high risk, that means they have worked with the survivor to understand there is a great risk of lethality. Her abusive partner would use many housing systems, technology and family to stalk her and the children. After staying in an emergency shelter, the survivor and her children were able to attain a new vehicle and a rented apartment. Shortly after she was settled, her abusive partner learned through family who she was renting from. When the abusive partner called the landlord, he was able to attain her new phone number, make and model of her new car, and new address. With all of this information given to the abusive partner, the family was again in crisis and in an incredibly dangerous situation- causing the family to have to start over again because of the immediate threat posed. In this bill, the landlord or housing provider who possesses documentation or information concerning a survivor of domestic violence shall keep the information confidential; and will not provide

access to another person unless authorized by the survivor, a court order, or government regulation.

Domestic and sexual violence agencies unfortunately do not work with every person in their service area that is experiencing domestic/sexual/dating violence or stalking. This is because of funding and other reasons, but it is also because our services are voluntary. It is essential that survivors are empowered by their community. For this to happen, we need to make our systems and community relationships accessible. Survivors should not be mandated to verify abuse by having another community partner or system validate their experience. In the movement to end domestic and sexual violence, advocates do this work best when we understand that survivors know their situation better than anyone else, and to believe survivors. People experience this violence at rapid rates. We know that unfortunately most women and people on the gender spectrum will experience domestic/sexual violence and stalking in their lifetime. It is vital to ending this violence as a whole to believe survivors when they are saying they are experiencing violence, and part of that is allowing survivors to self-certify to a landlord or housing subsidy that they are experiencing violence in order to terminate their lease. This will protect the safety and dignity of survivors and their families, as well as build a safer culture that allows everyone to thrive.

H.132 provides many vital protections that may seem small, but all have the ability to create a safer state for Vermonters. When I read this bill I was overwhelmed when thinking of stories to share that would be helpful. Every single day, in every county in Vermont, advocates are working with survivors around housing barriers. In this state, without the protections offered in this bill, survivors are going to continue to live in a fear. With my experience working with survivors of domestic and sexual violence, I strongly feel that this bill will create less survivors and families experiencing re-traumatization (and being caught in a cycle of) homelessness. These protections will allow survivors to stay in their homes without having to flee due to violence, or without or experiencing grave repercussions if they do flee. If this bill was able to become a reality, survivors of domestic violence would be able to thrive in their safe homes without the victimization or fear of losing their housing due to the violence they are experiencing.

H.132 gives Vermonters the safety and dignity they deserve, while fostering safety for children affected by violence, allowing them to thrive without fear and housing insecurity. I am very proud to live and work in a state that is thoughtful about these protections and hope to see them implemented. Thank you for your time.

