

Notes for Conversation with the Senate Committee on Economic Development,
Economic Development and General Affairs Committee Meeting

Michael Redmond, Executive Director, Upper Valley Haven

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My name is Michael Redmond. I am the Executive Director of the Upper Valley Haven in White River Junction, a position I've held for one and one-half years.

The Haven will be celebrating its 40th anniversary at the end of this year. We are a multi-service organization focused on the people of the Upper Valley, in both Vermont and New Hampshire who are challenged by the effects of poverty, both long-term and episodic. I believe we will be seeing a lot of the latter due to the economic dislocation caused by this pandemic.

Our services include emergency shelters for people who are homeless, supportive housing to help people remain sustainably housed, food programs to address food insecurity and hunger, children's services targeted to children who were once homeless or who are temporarily housed in our shelter and community case management targeted to people living in poverty and financially insecure.

The Haven has about 50 employees. Most of our revenue derives from private funding, but we do have several contracts with the Vermont Agency for Human Services, Office of Economic Opportunity to provide emergency shelter services and family supportive housing. Our shelters include an adult shelter with 20 beds, a family shelter for 8 families and a winter seasonal shelter for 15 adults. We are active in leadership of the Continuum of Care process and managing coordinated entry. Last time I checked about 86 of the 100 cases on the master list for coordinated entry for the Upper Valley region were from the Haven. This CoC is unique in that it includes both VT and NH organizations in recognition of the close partnership and integration of services between our two states.

In addition, we are closely involved in advocacy for the issues of affordable housing and homelessness. Leaders of the Haven have been in leadership roles at the Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition and the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness.

We work closely with many partners to help our clients achieve their goals. These include the state of Vermont, Twin Pines Housing, WISE, SEVCA, the Town of Hartford, HIV/HCS, Turning Point, HCRS, Clara Martin, Headrest and many more.

So, where to begin the story? I think the weekend of March 14-15 is as good a time as any. You'll recall that was the weekend you went to the store and there wasn't any toilet paper. This followed a weekend in which the NBA decided it was ending its season, the president made a speech which did nothing to instill any confidence in the leadership in Washington and the financial markets cratered.

We began to remake our services that weekend recognizing that new ways of working which focused on safety were needed and right away. We reduced the census in our seasonal shelter from 15 to 10 to comply with CDC guidelines for spacing, we stopped admitting new guests to our other two shelters and we moved our food shelf program, which is the second largest in the state, to a curbside and outside service to increased physical distancing. Many more changes would be coming.

By the end of the week we had agreed with OEO to close the seasonal shelter and help all our regular guests to be accepted by Economic Services GA program for motel vouchers through the Adverse Weather Conditions program. With the support of OEO we also identified shelter guests from the adult and family shelters who met the criteria for "hyper-vulnerable" due to age, respiratory conditions and other underlying health conditions and helped them secure motel vouchers through a new category of the GA program. Soon, we would learn that the state was waving the "adverse weather conditions" and were allowing people to remain in the motels. The first deadline was April 15 and that was extended to May 15. We also did outreach to the small population of people who choose to camp outside in the winter. We encouraged them to consider applying for a motel voucher through ESD. Most did, though a few remained outside camping.

Because there was no organized plan for food delivery to the motels that were being used by the State, we began a program of providing a mobile food shelf to the motels with weekly food delivery. We also shifted our case management services to supporting our clients in these new settings. Both telephone and in-person contacts, with appropriate social distancing, have occurred since mid-March. I commend my staff for their willingness to take on these assignments

when other organizations relied only on distant communication which is not always effective for these populations for many reasons, lack of trust being one of them.

We identified about 60 clients who were living in motels who had received services from the Haven and been active on our caseloads, both in the shelters and the community. Our services included regular outreach, housing search, support in securing documentation, case management and the food program. We soon learned through the food program distribution that the motel population, first in two, then three and now five motels had grown to over 120 households including 195 individuals including 14 children.

Where did all of these people come from? We can speculate. While there are a number of people who were homeless, both in shelters and unsheltered, there are also a large number of people in our community who are housing insecure. They couch surf, stay with friends, occasionally move into motels either sponsored by the state or paid privately. The impact of COVID-19 and the availability of the GA motel program combined to increase this population dramatically over the past six weeks.

The Haven, working with several other organizations, has initiated an outreach program, similar to that undertaken by other shelter providers in the state to understand the population now sheltered in motels better. These other organizations include family services, HIV/AIDS, Narcan distribution, drug treatment, mental health and physical health. We remain focused on ensuring that all these guests are aware of the risks of COVID-19 and have plans in place for insurance, PCPs, care of children and pets in case of emergencies and other preparedness steps. We are connecting people with health services such as oral health, physical health, drug treatment and medically assisted treatment.

We are also asking everyone we connect with -- what's your plan for housing once this voucher program ends? Those who are interested in participating in an assessment will be entered into the coordinated entry process. At another time this would be a typical process of one by one focus on a pathway towards a more stable housing future.

But these are not typical times. Though the date isn't known, there is a working assumption that the voucher program will come to an end. The questions are how

does it end, when and what are the plans for transition for these current motel guests.

We will learn more about the current guests. It's possible that some if not many have some resources for housing. They might be able to return to the places they came from. But many will not. And many had no secure housing supports before entering the motel program. They were in our shelter, sleeping in their cars, camping. Some were victims of domestic violence. Some were released from prison or were in a transitional housing program while undergoing drug rehab and recovery.

Here are some thoughts about actions the state of Vermont can take going forward to address the short, medium and long-term needs of our community related to housing. The CARES funding provides an opportunity to take actions to soften the dislocation caused by the pandemic and the economic contraction. There's a lot I don't know about the rules that govern how funding can be spent and the timing, but hopefully flexibility will be found and imagination to put it to best uses.

- The motel voucher program is now in place through May 15. It should be extended for several months. This will allow us to better understand capacities of those residing there and their goals. This doesn't mean that we can't immediately begin to take steps to reduce the population and move them towards more permanent housing solutions.
- I would use payment bonuses to encourage people to find their own solutions. It's possible that they have friends and family who can provide shelter. A bonus payment will facilitate these moves. These friends and family homes could also be eligible for time-limited rental assistance payments to encourage use of their homes for current motel guests.
- The Upper Valley is one of the regions in the state with the lowest vacancy rates and very expensive rents. The state should consider an option here and in other regions of the state to purchase one of the motels that have been used for temporary shelter and provide a lease arrangement with local non-profits with an option to purchase. The costs of operation will be less than current lease payments and the operation of the motels can follow the rules of shelter contracts which will result in improved behaviors

and less burden on local police. In time, these motels could be developed for permanent housing with lower density by combining rooms, creating kitchens and other amenities. There are many people staying in the motels who have poor rental histories and without other options. This idea could provide an opportunity for them to develop a better history and for the local non-profit to incorporate other service supports into its program model.

- There should be a general use of funds to create a nine-month rental assistance program for vulnerable households. Unemployment insurance payments will help many families, but these payments may not be sufficient or over a long enough period to cover rent and avoid build up of arrears. Without assistance renters could find themselves in debt, facing bad credit and in a poor labor market.
- Supportive housing programs should be expanded and bundled with rental assistance programs for populations with complex histories and need for support. This is a proven model but should be reserved for individuals and families with histories including chronically homeless, mental health challenges and substance use disorders.
- Affordable housing providers and nonprofits can provide social services to targeted populations to address many challenges including mental health, substance use recovery and case management.
- Preventing evictions should be a key strategy for the future. Programs that engage housing providers, management companies and small landlords to encourage early warning systems of renters missing payments or engaging in behaviors that will lead to eviction should be expanded. Early warning can lead to use of rental subsidies or other interventions to avoid expensive eviction proceedings and to change undesirable behaviors.
- A focus on homeowners is also needed. During the Great Recession foreclosures and abandonments led to thousands of households leaving ownership and entering the rental market. There is insufficient capacity in this market and it will further drive up rents. Lenders want to avoid foreclosure at all costs. The state should provide funds to expand and support the State's Home Ownership Centers and mortgage payment assistance.

- Emergency shelters should remain a source of temporary housing as a last resort. But the continued presence of the COVID-19 virus will change how these shelters operate. The same conditions that led to the use of motels this spring could return in the fall. Some existing shelters will not be able to safely operate if they provide congregate style shelter or they will operate at greatly reduced capacity. For the Haven, we cannot use the space we have for our winter seasonal shelter. Too small, no privacy, shared bathrooms and shower. We are starting a search for additional space, but this will result in increased expenses. Use of motels again might be necessary. Our other shelters can reopen but with reduced capacity. Our adult shelter which housed two people to a room will need to be for singles only. We will also need to develop new COVID-19 testing protocols and have available the capacity for regular test administration for safety.
- A few thoughts about the state's proposal to transfer operation of the GA motel voucher program to local non-profits. We certainly had the opportunity to learn a lot about what that program could look like as a result of this pandemic. We would encourage the AHS to continue to work with nonprofit shelter providers to develop this model. But we know now that it will require the state to remain as a back-up for times when circumstances change such as occurred this spring. Retaining responsibility for funding is essential. That said, we believe that the local shelters can bring additional flexibility to service models for more successful outcomes. But this will also require full funding of the administration, case management and other services that we have had to deliver during this pandemic.
- Finally, some commendations. I want to congratulate my staff for its efforts throughout this period. They stood up and were present and accounted for at every step. They were creative, resourceful and what I call cautiously fearless. I also want to commend the team at the Office of Economic Opportunity, the Economic Services Department, Buildings and General Services and everyone else we worked with from Vermont departments. They were proactive, accomplished and desired only the best outcomes for the people in need of support.