

**Testimony of Renee Weeks of West Newbury, VT
Director of Shelter & Clinical Services at the Upper Valley Haven and
Co-chair for the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness
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Good morning. Thank you for your service to the State of Vermont. My name is Renee Weeks. I grew up in Manchester, VT and currently reside in West Newbury, VT. I have worked professionally in human services in Vermont since 1999. I have worked for the Upper Valley Haven as the Director of Shelter and Clinical Services for the past 9 years. I also serve as the co-chair for the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness.

The Upper Valley Haven is a private, nonprofit organization that provides shelter, food, problem-solving and education in the Upper Valley. We operate three emergency shelters, a food shelf, we provide housing navigation, housing retention and supportive housing services. We also do homeless outreach in partnership with the Hartford Police Department and children's afterschool and summer programming for school aged children who have the common experience of homelessness. The Upper Valley Haven is the lead Coordinated Entry agency for the area. Coordinated Entry is the process by which people are assessed and prioritized for some housing resources in the state.

I am also here as representative of the VT Coalition to End Homelessness. As a coalition, we believe that everyone has a right to be housed. The Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness acts as the primary decision-making body of the Vermont Balance of State Continuum of Care and supports the work of local Continuums of Care with the goal that people



living in Vermont have safe, stable, affordable housing and if homelessness occurs it is a brief and rare occurrence during which everyone is treated with dignity and respect.

From June through October, I was invited to be a part of the Agency of Human Services Specialized Housing Voucher Workgroup as a service provider representative. The report with recommendations went out in November. The report addresses all three legs of the stool; Housing development, subsidies and the funding of housing support services. It also speaks to the value of partnerships between housing developers/managers and housing service providers. The Upper Valley Haven has partnered with Twin Pines Housing on many projects through the years. The collaboration has been an effective way to help people attain and sustain housing. We recently were invited to present at a charette hosted by the Corporation for Supportive Housing on one of our partnerships.

Over the past few months, I have had the opportunity to provide housing case management to a small caseload of people due to being short staffed. During that time, I worked with a woman who has been homeless off and on for the past 5 years. She has experienced chronic homelessness (staying in a place not meant for human habitation for 12 months or more continuously or having 4 episodes within the past three years that total up to 12 months; and has been diagnosed with a disabling condition.) I will call her by the alias, "Betty." Betty and her boyfriend arrived at the Haven Seasonal Shelter about this time last year. They had been staying in a Seasonal Shelter in another area of the state but were asked to leave due



to the behavior of the boyfriend. They stayed in our Seasonal Shelter until we closed in late April. When the shelter closed, they camped outside for a while. In May we were able to get them into our adult emergency shelter. Betty was engaged with mental health services to help manage her anxiety and depression. After being in the emergency shelter for a week, she said, "Boy, I can actually relax now." She was referring to the trauma of living a life where you may have a place to sleep, but you don't really know where you will be during the day or where your next meal may come from. She had been living under the stress of uncertainty and could not focus on anything more than trying to figure out where to sleep and how to eat. After being settled in the shelter, Betty stated she felt safe and comfortable enough to begin seeking employment. With the help of her housing case manager, she was able to get a 32 hour per week position as a custodian at an assisted living facility. Meanwhile, she was on our coordinated entry list for a shelter plus care subsidy, and her name was next on the list. She is currently in process of working with Pathways Vermont to get her subsidy. Once that is in place we will work as a team to help find an apartment that will accept the subsidy.

It is amazing to witness what "stability" brings to people. I have seen "housing stability" totally transform people and their lives. Stability increases their bandwidth so that they may focus on the things in their lives that will aid in sustaining what they have. There was no way Betty would have been able to work while using the Seasonal Shelter or being in a tent. In the Seasonal Shelter, you need to be out during the day. The unpredictability of not knowing if you will get a bed at the shelter every night

