

Testimony to House Energy and Technology Committee – February 23, 2021

Good morning, for the record, my name is Molly Dugan and I want to thank you Chairman Briglin and the committee members for providing the opportunity for VHCC members to testify today. Besides being the Director of Policy and Strategic Initiatives (and previously Director of the statewide SASH program for over a decade) at Cathedral Square I am one of the Co-Chairs of VHCC. I am pleased to be here this morning to let you know about some of the exciting and necessary developments and initiatives Cathedral Square as well as others in Vermont's affordable housing network are undertaking, or have completed, related to ensuring equal access to technology for our residents- most of whom are low-income and historically marginalized.

First, a brief overview of Cathedral Square. We are a non-profit housing and services organization operating for over 40 years in primarily the NW region of Vermont. We develop affordable housing and rely on many sources of funding to do so- a primary one is VHCB. We own and manage 26 housing communities providing homes for over 1,200 Vermonters. While the majority of our residents are older Vermonters or adults with disabilities, we also have a number of special purpose housing communities for families. The age span of our residents is 4 to 102! 10.2% of our residents identify as non-white- larger than the state percentage of BIPOC Vermonters that is 6% according to VDH. Our residents are primarily low-income – almost 70% are considered very low or low income by federal HUD standards (incomes at or below 30-50% AMI) and 96% receive rent subsidies or rent reductions. 15.6% of our residents were homeless before coming to Cathedral Square. We currently have 1300+ people on our waiting list. Average wait time is 3-5 years.

Cathedral Square has been committed to using our affordable housing platform to improve access and therefore reduce the digital divide between high and low income people as well as rural and urban- this divide is well documented in research. Our residents are traditionally behind when it comes to access to and comfort with technology- it is an equity issue plain and simple. How are we doing this?

Addressing technology and connectivity barriers in multiple ways:

1. **Free Wi-Fi available** at all our properties.
2. **Community computer available** for residents that do not own a computer or laptop.
3. **Expanding broadband and improving broadband quality**- we partnered with the Department of Public Service last fall to install extended range Wi-Fi access points to provide greater access for our residents at four of our properties- Ruggles House, Whitcomb Woods, Fourwinds and JeriHill locations. Providing Wi-Fi access has been challenging due to the

physical layout of properties like these and/or the ability to provide stable wireless access over larger rural areas. Prior to the pandemic, it was our goal to provide additional access to all properties and Covid really made this a necessity. For many, getting to the local doctors office or even the hospital was already difficult especially in the winter months and then add on Covid where accessing in-person was pretty much unavailable to our residents- most with complex chronic disease. We were not the only affordable housing provider taking on this work of increasing broadband with the help of the Dept. of Public Service- I Many other providers did as well- from Rural Edge in NE Kingdom to Downstreet serving central Vermont and Brattleboro and Bennington Rutland housing organizations, among others.

- 4. Telehealth Initiative** – Cathedral Square has been working to establish a robust telehealth program within our properties since before Covid- collaborating with hospitals and primary care practices since 2018. We have eight properties with what we call telehealth suites (funded by grants) - with the technology and equipment to provide as close to in person visits as possible (see photos). The SASH Wellness Nurse provides the assistance and takes patient vitals for the provider who is connected via the internet. When Covid hit we shifted into high gear to implement a statewide (through SASH) telehealth assist initiative with the goals of getting tablets distributed to all SASH affordable housing providers in the state to have a lending library so that their residents would have a way to see their health care providers. In partnership with VPQHC, we applied for and received 270 iPads that have been distributed to SASH housing organizations across the state to facilitate access to health appointments as well as social connections with family as well as evidence based prevention programs.

The platform of affordable, high quality housing across the state has been essential to scaling up this kind of technology connection and telehealth initiative. This housing would not be available without VHCB and the capital and technical assistance funded by the Legislature. Please support the Governor's recommended \$34.8 M to VHCB and importantly provide the flexibility to VHCB to determine how the funds should be distributed between the dual mission goals of housing and conservation.

Respectfully Submitted,
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Director of Policy and Strategic Initiatives

Cathedral Square

www.cathedralsquare.org