

Homelessness Awareness Day Testimony
House General and Human Services Committees
Robert Little, Director of Community Development, RuralEdge

Good morning! My name is Robert Little and I serve as the Director of Community Development at RuralEdge, the primary affordable housing developer in the Northeast Kingdom. I also serve as the secretary for the Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition. In my role at RuralEdge, I oversee communications and resident services, including our Community Building and Engagement and our SASH (Support and Services at Home) program. I know these days at the beginning of the legislative season are full of individuals and organizations advocating for the needs of Vermonters with diverse issues and struggles, so I want to begin this testimony with some successes that RuralEdge has experienced thanks to your efforts in the past two years.

In summer 2020, using CARES Act funding, we were able to rehab seven units of housing in downtown St. Johnsbury, all of which were leased to families from the local Coordinated Entry list. While we shared the concerns that concentrating seven families totaling 27 people previously experiencing homelessness could create issues, as we learned the stories of these residents, as well as having the assurance that Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA) would provide supportive services, our concerns became an optimistic opportunity.

One of these families, a blended family of six, was burned out of their mobile home six months before becoming our tenants. Both parents continued to work in the food service industry in Littleton, New Hampshire with only one vehicle, and the parents would take turns making sure their children stayed on top of their remote learning, at the height of a Pandemic, all while living in a motel. Their perseverance at the most difficult time in their lives has continued throughout the first year in our housing and they, along with the other six households, have all retained their housing in large part due to the network of support provided to them.

In 2021, using VHCB funding, including some ARPA funding, RuralEdge was able to purchase the Brightlook Apartments in the Four Seasons Neighborhood of St. Johnsbury. Most of the tenants of this 18-unit former hospital are elderly and the previous owner kept rents below market value with no subsidy and no leases. When the property listed, there were multiple offers from out of state developers.

If one of these developers had purchased this property, rents would have increased dramatically, causing some of these residents to be priced out of their housing. The owner of the property did not want to see that happen, so he was willing to speak to RuralEdge. We made the case to VHCB, who awarded us the funding to purchase this property, ensuring its perpetual affordability. We are already in the process of upgrading the systems at the property and are looking at a full rehabilitation and expansion within the next five years.

As part of the conditions of ARPA funding, we had to set aside two units for those currently experiencing homelessness. We were able to place a 97-year-old World War II veteran who was experiencing homelessness. He found himself homeless in a motel because, after several years, he decided he could no longer live in the camper with no running water that he was living in on his son's property. His income could not quite support the market rent, so we lowered the rent until he can secure a voucher through his Veterans Affairs caseworker. He has already become an active member of the Brightlook community and has become friends with several other residents. These are successes worth celebrating!

While these successes give us great hope, there is no shortage of challenges that housing providers face when housing those previously experiencing homelessness. The funding for wraparound services that are needed for so many are not adequate to serve the needs that we address as housing providers. When individuals disengage from their service providers, or the period of wraparound services in the program that got them housed have concluded, it ultimately falls on the housing providers to address the issues these residents face when they are in crisis. While our staff are competent and go above and beyond the duties in their job descriptions every day, the fact is that we are not trained to address the diverse needs that come with housing individuals previously experiencing homelessness.

We do have a service coordination model in SASH that works effectively for over 500 people in the Northeast Kingdom alone. However, this program is limited to those who are Medicare eligible and, even with that restriction, RuralEdge historically has had to subsidize the program out of our operating budget. There have been efforts at developing a Family SASH, or SASH For All, model, but the funding for that program has not been secured for its long-term sustainability.

Even without that funding, we have used a similar model at our 48-unit Mountain View Housing in St. Johnsbury through our existing SASH and Community Building & Engagement programs. Over 50% of residents there have moved to Mountain View from homelessness, and our services have helped build an intentional community where residents feel safe and supported. If funding for Family SASH were available to us, we could expand our offerings significantly by expanding our SASH staff to cover Mountain View and our other large multi-family developments.

SASH, which provides preventive nursing services and robust service coordination through non-profit housing providers, allows us to serve as a first point of contact for our residents and members of the community in communicating with doctors, caseworkers, and others, along with providing food security services and regular wellness assessments. This model further positions us to address housing stability issues as they arise. This program works and needs to be funded at a higher level to become more readily available for all, especially as the needs of residents increases.

As great as our SASH Team is, they need the support of local service providers to deliver direct services, especially mental health services, effectively and regularly. Without these service providers, our service coordination services will have few organizations to turn to, which decreases our effectiveness and increases the burden on us when residents are in crisis. Without these services, despite our best efforts, we have no choice but to proceed with eviction, which is something we do not want to do and defeats the purpose of setting units aside for those experiencing homelessness. As a housing provider, we see funding for supportive services as of equal importance as funding for housing itself.

This is a significant time in our history, not only to alleviate the burden the housing crisis has created in our state, but to change how we view ongoing support once we secure housing for those most in need. Any efforts you make in the development of affordable housing and the accompanying services has a direct impact on the effectiveness that RuralEdge, and the other affordable housing providers in the state, can have on the communities we serve. Thank you for your time and your efforts to address the many needs presented to you today.