

Good morning.

I am Beth Ann Maier, and I participate in faith-based community organizing through Vermont Interfaith Action. I had arranged to have two people use this space in the testimony. Sadly, today, they are both very ill with COVID and can barely speak. I will attempt to faithfully represent them. They have been living in GA hotel housing for over 20 months. They are very grateful for the privacy and warmth of their motel rooms. However, they have been arbitrarily moved from motel to motel, away from their families, their health care providers, their connections to social services, with very limited access to transportation. For over 20 months, they have tried to meet their nutritional needs with a motel mini-fridge and a microwave. These are people that have spent their working careers in low-paying human service jobs as aides in mental health, nursing homes, and childcare homes. Their homelessness is the result of a lifetime on the margins of poverty.

I am also a retired pediatrician. I have watched families struggle on the border of poverty in Vermont for over forty years. Many of the decisions made in this building have directly contributed to their struggle. We continue to make decisions that allow people to go to work all day every day and not earn enough to meet their family's basic needs. We have continued for over twenty years to underfund our housing system, and allow our housing to become unsafe and inhabitable, and now there is no place for over 2000 Vermonters to call home. We own the outcome, homelessness for over 2000 Vermonters. We have a moral responsibility to see them through this time with dignity and safety until permanent affordable housing is available.

Twenty years ago, I sat in my office seeing a previously healthy eight-year-old for the third time, because abdominal pain had caused her to miss several weeks of school. Before I consigned her to many thousands of dollars' worth of medical studies I could enact with my pen, I asked, for the third time, if there was anything happening in her life that was unusually stressful. Her mother finally told me that the rented house they had been living in all the child's life, had been sold, and they had been unable to find another place to live. They would be homeless in two days, and they would not be able to keep the child's beloved pet dog. Stomach aches in children are not a new problem in Vermont. Homelessness is not a new problem in Vermont. And it is often just being on the wrong side of a lucky roll of the dice that causes a family to tumble into homelessness. I often wonder where that child is now. Did the trauma of homelessness snowball through her life? How has it affected her children's life? How much has that episode of homelessness cost the state of Vermont over the last twenty years. I urge you to make decisions that are proactive, not reactive. Look to what will build a healthy Vermont 20 years from now.

As Paul Dragon said, those without homes right now are diverse and they reflect us. They are grandmothers, they are grandchildren. They are our sons and daughters. They are us and reflect all our abilities to make poor choices as well as to be resilient. Many in hotel housing have the skills and desire to turn vacant buildings into well-run group homes. We need to tap into the skills and abilities of those with lived experience and enlist them in the solutions. Meanwhile, we make these three requests.

- Continue to not only provide emergency housing support until permanent housing becomes available, but immediately stand up living spaces that are safer, healthier, and more responsive to their needs than motel rooms.

- Address the safety issues that are escalating in many of the motel settings. Within one hallway, we have elderly, disabled and vulnerable individuals as well as people prone to violent and predatory behavior.
- Create an ombudsman for those that are engaged with government and non-profit services as they try to find a place to live. They have been engaged in struggle and stress for over 20 months. The service providers have similarly been struggling and stressed. We absolutely need to celebrate the triumphs when some have become housed, but we also need to listen to those who have not. Mistakes have been made. Confidentiality has been breached. People need a point of contact to hear their stories and bring them to you, the decision-makers.

Thank you

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