



groundworks  
COLLABORATIVE

Testimony provided by Jon Hoover, Director of Operations for Groundworks Collaborative for the House Human Services and Senate Health and Welfare Joint Committee Hearing on 11/18/22

Thank you for your ongoing concern for homeless vermonters, not just in today's hearing but throughout your work in the legislature and also thank you for taking some time to hear from service providers throughout the state.

While here, I'd like to express our deepest appreciation for my colleagues here with me. The depth of their experience and commitment to the well-being of marginalized and vulnerable Vermonters is an inspiration to me. I'd also like to recognize and say thank you to our partners in the various state agencies that support homeless and housing services. Particularly, the Vermont Office of Economic Opportunity whose leadership and support to us and our colleagues has been invaluable long before but especially since this current crisis came to be.

Groundworks Collaborative, based out of Brattleboro, works with people and systems to create solutions to end hunger and homelessness for all people in our region. Amongst other programs, we operate two shelters with 30 and 34 beds respectively, both of which are persistently full, as well as provide case management to the majority of the 150 households living in the DCF transitional housing program in our area.

Since January we've worked with 168 individuals who are homeless and staying in the motels. Of those:

90% have some kind of a disability

40% have a chronic health condition

61% have a mental health disorder

42% struggle with substance use

And 86% of them have household income under \$20,000 with 28% reporting no income whatsoever.

Even with a healthy housing market and available rentals many of these individuals would still struggle to afford rent and live independently and successfully without some level of supportive services.

I appreciate your query into how the administration is managing the unwinding of VERAP funded programming. While managing for the best timing and most positive impact is

basic needs met with dignity

GroundworksVT.org | PO Box 370, Brattleboro, VT 05302 | 802.257.5415



important, to us a debate over which month to rip the band-aid off is only of limited consequence.

In fact, the band-aid metaphor falls short. These programs are a tourniquet staunching a wound and not whether, when, and how the blood loss resumes but the fact that this is coming is the concern that weighs most heavily on our minds. Apologies for the gruesome metaphor but I make it to convey the existential stakes we are sitting with.

The outlook for next spring concerns us greatly and we are trying to pull together what we can for outreach services. We hope that some of the households staying in the motels will avail themselves of friends and families who have an extra room or a couch to sleep on and we have no reason to expect that many of these households will have that option. As we come into winter there are already a number of people camping in Brattleboro due to the motels and shelters being at capacity. We have every expectation that the number of unsheltered community members will massively increase next spring. I wave that flag now as an advocate who is concerned about their welfare. Based on the current tenor of public discourse in Brattleboro, you will be hearing from a lot more members of the public throughout Vermont as our housing crisis becomes much more visible and the look and feel of our downtowns changes significantly. The emergency shelter and housing system in our state is already saturated and the ending of rental supports will fill our communities with even more unsheltered households.

We all know that an abundance of affordable and permanent housing is a key piece in ending this crisis and we appreciate the substantial funding made available for this and the significant effort of housing developers throughout the state. We truly value our partnerships with local affordable housing developers such as Windham & Windsor Housing Trust and Brattleboro Housing Partnerships. Windham & Windsor's rapid engagement early in the pandemic to convert Dalem's Chalet to Permanent Supportive Housing and also their and Brattleboro Housing Partnership's joint effort in programs such as the new SASH 4 All pilot program in Brattleboro, which will help residents maintain housing stability, are two of many testaments to how seriously they take their role in responding to this crisis.

That said, developing new units takes time and we are currently nowhere near the threshold needed to put roofs over the heads of all who need them in Windham County and certainly not throughout the state.

VERAP and its predecessor funding sources became available due to one crisis but the crisis of housing insecurity in our communities has been coming to a boil long before it came along. The programs have not been without shortcomings and we acknowledge they are costly.



But these initiatives have significantly reduced real, tangible and existential harm to the people they have supported.

As you are trying to navigate ways to extend and lessen the harm of the unwind - undoubtedly organizations like Groundworks will continue to play a crucial role in implementation.

With that noted, I come to you not as a service provider seeking one more funding opportunity or contract extension. If anything, the prospect of continuing these programs or replacing them with a more cost effective iteration is daunting - our capacity as an employer of frontline staff working to meet these needs is tenuous and fragile at the moment.

However, what is more daunting to us is to see two major safety nets disappear in short order. The impact of losing homelessness prevention tools such as rental subsidies AND vital shelter through the transitional housing program is immense. The harm to those directly affected is life altering and the impact on the broader fabric of our communities is great.

There is no one solution and no easy solution. I urge you to consider the following amongst the other ideas put forward today:

- With funds remaining or additional appropriations, extend for as long as possible General Assistance motel vouchers for the most vulnerable households.
- Support an increase in funding for the rapid development of non-congregate shelters throughout the State. I come from an agency that recently developed a new shelter with significant support from State, Federal and private sources. The conventional path takes significant time, staff resources and money. The development burden of the acquisition of property, piecing together funding sources and regulatory compliance hurdles can take years. Moreover, emergency shelters are a key asset in a community but we look forward to a future that, while a necessary resource, stays in the shelter will be short and rare.

The current and anticipated demand for shelters far exceeds what exists. A rapid response can be achieved through existing channels such as the Office of Economic Opportunity by way of increased funding for lease and operational costs of shelters at existing assets, such as motels. If considered, acquisitions of property would need to be supported by flexible sources and engage the partnership of municipalities and housing developers so that these properties can be converted to permanent housing over time.

- Lastly and at the very least, continue to use the power of your position to make this urgent need a priority for our state and our leadership.



Vermont has a deep bench of compassionate and creative leaders throughout the continuum of stakeholders that can develop a long term and sustainable solution. Much is already in development and much more needs to be done.

The matters before you are dire and serious and that I trust you as stewards of the State of Vermont to work with us and other partners to find a way forward.

Thank you.