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My name is Michael Redmond. I am the Executive Director of the Upper Valley Haven in White River Junction. I very much appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today focused on a few topics of interest, especially Vermont's plan to restructure the General Assistance Temporary and Emergency Housing program.

Let me begin by saying that I agree with the recent testimony provided by DCF Commissioner Sean Brown and director of OEO Sarah Phillips to several legislative committees that there is great potential in this idea by changing from the current "rules-based" GA program to one that is based on client needs allowing flexible service models and tapping into the experience and knowledge of community organizations.

That said, there remains much we don't know about the specific plans of the State for this transition which is now being planned while a worldwide pandemic remains in effect with unknown conditions that will exist at the time of the proposed transfer in October. I heard similar concerns expressed by members of the Vermont House Committee on Appropriations last week during the testimony from Commissioner Brown.

There are now 1800 households receiving temporary shelter in motels including several hundred families. How many will still be there in October, the time of the proposed transfer? Without profound changes in the current rental market through additions of new affordable housing units, more supportive housing services and more rent subsidies, how much change can we reasonably expect from the community organizations to help these households now living in motels to transition to permanent housing? Will there be sufficient dollars in the contracts to manage this scale of program implementation?

I very much agree with the comments of House Appropriations Chair Representative Mary Hooper who said “the tail of the recovery” referring to this pandemic and economic dislocation “is going to be substantial, years probably, not completed with the flick of a switch.” Commissioner Brown also correctly raised concerns about the lack of affordable housing and rental vouchers that are hindering people who are temporarily housed in motels from securing permanent housing.

Perhaps it would be valuable frame the plan for a transition based on the metrics that need to be in place at the time of the change in program administration? Or at least that these metrics would scale the program response in terms of resources. Such metrics could include the number of households still residing in motels, the percentage of Vermonters who have been vaccinated, community virus infection rates, rental housing vacancy rates and the unemployment rate.

In addition to the funding contained in contracts with community providers, how many rental housing vouchers will be available to support the transition from motels to community housing? Will the 211 system will remain in place to support the administration of this program. Have statewide rules been written so that there is uniformity in treatment of clients? Will the state continue to contract with motels or is that now the responsibility of community organizations?

Perhaps rather than a total statewide change to the system, DCF should begin by mounting pilot projects in a few selected regions, similar to community programs it put in place that provide services for victims of Domestic Violence who are need shelter?

That said, I can only applaud the efforts of Vermont, the Department of Children & Families and the Department of Economic Services since that time. Vermont is a national model for its response to provide shelter for its most vulnerable citizens with only a handful of people living in emergency shelter who have tested positive and no deaths. And throughout the past year the state has worked creatively with these same community organizations as partners in service delivery.

As we plan for the future, we should keep this partnership in mind.

I urge that whenever this idea is put into effect the state remain a backstop for the unexpected, not just ask the community agencies to manage this program on our own. If we've learned anything over this past year is that we cannot simply will the changes we want, we can only respond to what is before us with imagination, experience, sufficient resources and a continuous focus on safety for all. I encourage the Appropriation Committees to keep that in mind as well.