

Good morning and thank you Senators for your service to Vermont during these difficult pandemic days.

My name is Hilary Melton and I am the founding Executive Director of Pathways Vermont whose mission is to end homelessness and provide innovative mental health alternatives. Today I am here to testify in support of S.194 and S.195, acts relating to peer-operated respite centers, and certification of mental health peer support specialists.

Since Pathways Vermont began providing services 12 years ago, it was clear that Vermont's system of care was lacking in alternatives to hospitalization for people experiencing mental health challenges. Time and time again people who are struggling, people who are in need of support, and people who simply do not feel safe alone, turn to the emergency room for relief.

One bright spot is Vermont's only peer respite, Alyssum in Rochester, Vermont. However, the problem with Alyssum is that it is always full and there is always a waiting list. We have a model that has a 10-year track record of success. With S. 194 we simply want to invest in what is working so more Vermonters have access to peer respites, and don't unnecessarily go to the hospitals.

S. 195 is a tandem bill to the peer respite bill. Currently, mental health peer support is offered in Vermont without any standards of experience and training, no competency standards, and no ethical standards. If it becomes law, S.195 would validate the discipline of peer support as a distinct practice, define the scope of practice, standardize qualifications and competencies, and allow services to be billed to Medicaid, which would reduce the State's costs.

These last few months as I have been meeting with legislators and the community about S. 194 and S. 195 a question invariably comes up that I would like to pre-emptively answer today.

The question is this:

Do Vermont's peer organizations have the **capacity** or the **knowledge** to be able to get seven peer respites and a peer certification program up and running?

The answer is a resounding yes. We are a strong, capable group of organizations.

I want to share with you a little about my organization- Pathways Vermont- as an example.

Pathways Vermont provides services in every county in Vermont. With a 9 million plus dollar budget, our funding partners include the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the VT Department of Mental Health, the VT Department of Corrections, the VT Department of Aging and Independent Living, the University of Vermont, various local United Way chapters, local towns and cities, among others.

We are a Specialized Service Agency for the Department of Mental Health and we bill Medicaid for Housing First services, an evidence-based model that we introduced to Vermont in 2009. We have been writing service plans, documenting service delivery, and billing Medicaid for over 8 years. Just last quarter alone, our Housing First program logged approximately 4,000 hours of service delivered in person in the community.

Pathways currently has 128 employees and 80% of us, including myself, have a variety of lived experiences of mental health challenges, substance use, homelessness, incarceration, and/or trauma. We practice a relationship model of support informed by Intentional Peer Support, a curriculum developed by Shery Mead,

In addition to our work ending homelessness, we also operate several innovative mental health programs including the Pathways Vermont Community Center in Chittenden County, the Pathways Vermont Support Line (a statewide service), and our Soteria House (a 5 bed licensed residential program available to anyone in Vermont).

For the past two years, we have spearheaded the Department of Mental Health Peer Workforce Development Initiative whose purpose is to improve consistency, infrastructure, communication, and resource sharing among the peer-workforce community.

I am here to assure you that we are ready, willing, and more than able.

Thank you for your time and consideration this morning.