



**United Way of
Northwest Vermont**



February 10, 2022

Dear Members of the Vermont Senate Economic Development Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about housing, and how the housing crisis is affecting Vermont's diverse workforce.

My name is Connie Beal, Working Bridges Initiative Director with United Way of Northwest Vermont.

United Way's Working Bridges is an innovative program that is good for employees, good for businesses, and good for the community. Working Bridges has helped local employers retain employees, increase productivity, lower absenteeism, build capacity of lean HR units and supported employees through the keystone strategy of onsite Resource Coordination.

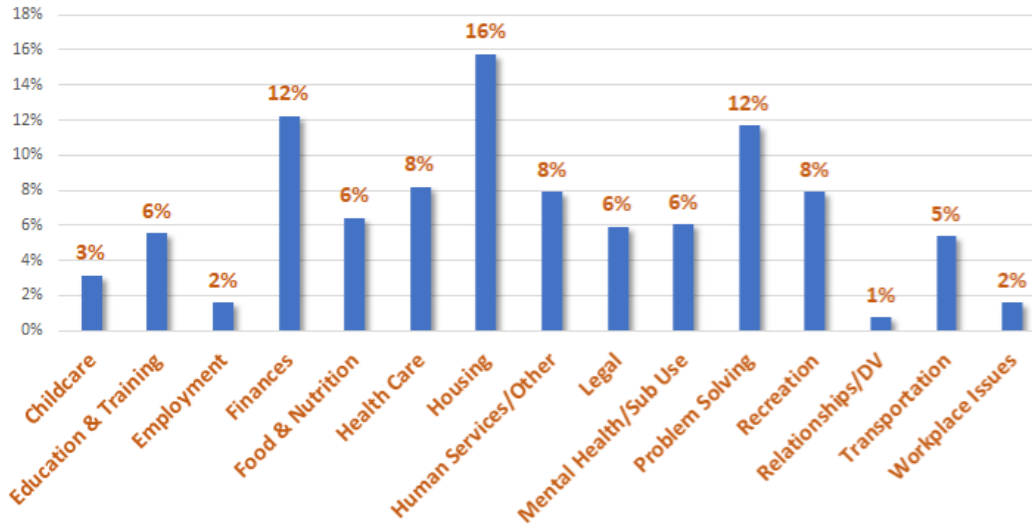
The Working Bridges network of employers extends across industries, including manufacturers, healthcare, hospitality, food service, higher education, mental health care, home health care and long-term care residential settings. Employees we work with are generally considered essential workers, showing up to keep us healthy, to keep the hospital clean, to feed our community, to take care of our loved ones, and to keep Vermont's economy thriving.

Resource Coordinators are certified Community Resource Specialists (CRS) who work with employees across companies, confidentially, at work, to help navigate services, supports, and resources that can help employees keep their jobs and advance in their work.

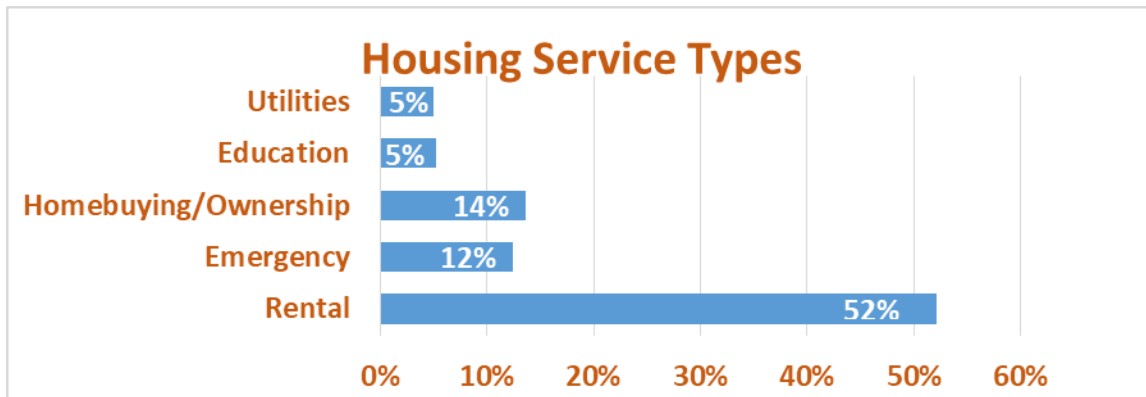
Essential resources such as housing, transportation, childcare, health care, and food are some examples of the kinds of topics Resource Coordinators help employees access. All these resources are interconnected, help all of us get to and from work, and contribute to vital community economic development, but I am here today to discuss housing as a critical workforce infrastructure to keep and recruit Vermont's needed workforce.

To recruit good employees, combat rising turnover, and meet the call for increased inclusion and equity, some employer partners are practicing "Open Hiring," which does away with systemic barriers to employment such as interviews, formal education history and record checks, and embeds wraparound supports and recovery-friendly strategies in the workplace. Systemic barriers to employment often translate into exacerbated barriers to housing. We work with employees that struggle to secure rental housing due to credit, criminal record issues, no landlord references, or for whom English is not their first language.

Working Bridges Network-Wide Resource Connections 2021



In 2021, the top reason 802 individual employees sought the help of a Resource Coordinator was due to housing needs, and **rental housing was the primary need**. It likely does not surprise you that employees we work with are or are at risk of slipping into homelessness due to the sheer lack of rental housing and the lack of access to affordable rental housing.



In 2021, the average wage of employees that met with a Working Bridges Resource Coordinator was approximately \$18.00 an hour. Many housing assistance programs, including emergency housing, have not kept pace with rising wages, leaving employees who experience homelessness without any safety nets. Housing subsidies are not available or, if they are, may keep employees “parked” in their job, stunting advancement and growth. This leads to employees declining overtime, limiting hours, or simply leaving the workforce to stay within income limits. These benefit cliffs, while unintentional, seem to disincentivize work as employees depend on them to meet basic housing needs.

It is hard to believe that full-time workers in our community are without decent housing. With community resources at capacity, shelters full, wait lists running weeks to months long, employees are faced with no alternatives, staying in their vehicles in winter or church basements not meant for housing, relying on showers

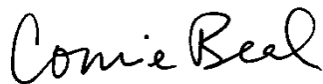
available at their workplace. In situations when employees are eligible for emergency housing, the limited supply of motels has meant no emergency housing options available. Pathways to homeownership, a goal for many, continues to feel out of reach for most employees we meet with.

It is inconceivable that a full-time worker doing everything to provide for themselves and their family could be without a safe, decent place to sleep at night. With employees paying over 50% of their income toward rent, there is very little left to meet the other costs of being a worker in Vermont (e.g. transportation, child care, health care, etc). Employees make hard decisions to leave Vermont because of these costs, leaving businesses with a shrinking workforce. These are the reasons we need the state's investment in housing for workers who are essential to a healthy, stable economy where there is opportunity for all Vermonters.

United Way's Working Bridges is exploring ways to connect employers with Champlain Housing Trust to design and test workforce housing options as an innovative recruitment and retention strategy. Innovation is at the heart of Working Bridges and there is an opportunity to leverage partnerships across sectors to reimagine how workers access housing. Many businesses are thinking about investing in affordable housing, but Champlain Housing Trust and others will need to secure resources from agencies like the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, so we encourage you to continue to support this critical work.

Thank you for your time and efforts on the complicated issue of housing, that is so deeply interconnected to essential resources, economic opportunity, and workforce sustainability. Please don't hesitate to reach out to me directly if you wish to explore deeper partnership on issues that impact workers, particularly low-wage, frontline workers.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Connie Beal". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Connie Beal
802-881-4218
connie@unitedwaynwvt.org