

**Presentation to Senate Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs**

**January 27<sup>th</sup>**

**Presenters: Sue Minter, ED Capstone Community Action**

**and**

**Eileen Peltier, ED Downstreet Housing and Community Development**

**on behalf of the**

**Washington County Homelessness Task Force**

*Task Force Member Organizations: AHS Field Services, Another Way, Capstone Community Action, Downstreet Housing and Community Development, Family Center of Washington County, Good Samaritan Haven and Washington County Mental Health Services*

Good morning. Thank you for your service to our state through these extraordinary times. And thank you for inviting us to join you on this important day. I am Sue Minter, ED of Capstone, Community Action the anti-poverty organization in WA, Lamoille & Orange Counties, part of the network of five Community Action Agencies throughout the state dedicated to poverty relief and advancing social & economic justice. Today I am here as a member of the Washington County Homelessness Response Team, which has now become an ongoing Task Force. We have worked as a collective force, since the first days of the March shut down to stand up critical supports for our homeless neighbors. I am so pleased to be joined by Eileen Peltier, of Downstreet Housing and Community Development who has worked with me as a Unified Commander in our Washington County Incident Command Center, and as a key leader in our ongoing weekly Task Force meetings.

It is so important that we all take this time, as you are today, to reflect, to listen, to learn, and to advocate for solutions to homelessness and housing insecurity. Being homeless is deeply traumatic and stigmatizing and often results in long-term negative impacts on one's physical, mental, and financial health. Our community is only as strong as its weakest member, and we have a moral responsibility to do all we can address these societal traumas. The search for ways

to address homelessness is not only a moral obligation, it is your statutory duty embedded into the state budget to “address the needs of the people of Vermont in a way that advances human dignity and equity.” Thank you for taking this responsibility forward with your work today and this year.

For decades we, as a community, have been tolerating a significant increase in the number of our neighbors being un-housed. But the arrival of COVID initiated a significant shift, because you can’t “stay home and stay safe” without a home. And today, as a state, we should be proud to say we have a system – albeit temporary -- that provides a home to anyone that wants one. The challenge of course is that our current approach of housing people in hotels is neither an adequate solution, nor financially sustainable to meet the multi-faceted needs of our neighbors experiencing homelessness.

You have been hearing how each region of our state has responded to the pandemic crisis in different ways; but, it is critical to understand that we have all been stepping up, tirelessly, to meet the extraordinary and unprecedented demands of our time. We have worked closely with our state agencies – and I want to commend the tremendous work & dedication of AHS-- DCF/OEO, DMH, DPH as well as the EOC for their dedication and partnership – responding rapidly to the unfolding situation; proactively agreeing to place homeless neighbors into hotels; taking over feeding the guests that many community orgs like Capstone had managed for 5 months; most significantly supporting our team with resources for housing counseling, mental health & medical supports, safety and security supports. The programs you have funded through CARES Act have been essential – from housing subsidy vouchers, to rental assistance and rental rehabilitation funds, and Rapid Resolution funding which provides essential flexibility around use and eligibility for the funding needed to move people forward. All of these collective resources have truly made THE difference for our community. We now are optimistic that much of this work will continue for the next 6 months and hopefully longer.

Our task force has prepared a two-page impact report, submitted to the Committee, describing work that we have done since COVID began. We feel grateful for the fact that Vermont has stepped up in tremendous ways to meet the moment, keeping our hotel guests safe, addressing immediate health needs,

and root causes of homelessness. But, today, we also continue to face dire numbers. First, some critical data worth pointing out:

- In march of 2020, Washington County had 128 households on our coordinated entry list. Today we have 342 -- 153% increase.
- For adults, that is 153 pre-COVID, today, 396. Children, 42 in March of 2020, 91 today.
- Remarkably, during this same period, we permanently housed 65 households and brought on line 67 apartments with a homeless preference.
- Looking at shelter capacity, the GSH has gone from a 76 -bed capacity pre-COVID to 25 beds today. That 51-bed decrease will not automatically return post-COVID. And note, these beds are for individuals only.
- Currently, there are no emergency shelters in our region, except for families with children, hotels are the only option.

Although these numbers may seem overwhelming, this year has certainly taught us all that we are stronger than we think, more capable than we believe, and far more resilient than we ever imagined. Most important, we know what is possible and that we must commit to using this crisis as a transformational time – a moment when we continue to move forward & and never backwards-- to address the tremendous disparity in our state and nation.

So now Eileen will now share some of the recommendations and requests from our Washington County Homelessness Task Force.

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Good Morning. I am Eileen Peltier, ED of Downstreet Housing and Community Development. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on Homeless Awareness Day. My role today is to share some specifics about what we together believe is needed. Sorry, I usually do the verbose inspirational speech, but, not today. Today, we need action. So, here we go.

First, I will touch on the three legged stool of housing supply, subsidy, and case management. Supply is tenuous and inadequate. We need our offline privately owned rentals to come back online which would mean a continuation of the rental rehab program. We need funding for our upcoming project in Berlin that will serve 30 families. We need to understand the impact of short-term rentals on our housing stock in Washington County and take steps to find a balance between the positives of tourism

and the critical need to house all of our neighbors. Subsidy: We need more and we need it to be permanent not temporary. Case management: Our task force is working hard to understand our many and varied ways in which we case manage our vulnerable neighbors. We need the flexibility to use our funds in innovative ways, and likely we need more funds to meet the need.

Specifically, speaking to the emergency shelter beds for individuals, we need to develop 40 to 50 new beds. To make this happen, we need both capital to develop the building and a commitment to on-going operating support.

For families, we need to expand Family Supportive Housing vouchers and associated programs. This program works and with funds we can do more for the 91 children in our hotels today.

To ensure we coordinate effectively and efficiently, we need financial support to invest in the development of a Virtual HUB for homeless services in Central Vermont. We are committed to our partnership and strongly believe we can do have a greater impact if we can get capacity support to move our vision along.

We believe there is strong potential to successfully house individuals in a SRO model with peer support. WCMHS has leased four buildings and is currently housing a total of 14 individuals with great success.

Many of these requests can have an immediate impact. Others will take time. Time we may not have. At this point, we understand that the hotel system including the enhanced case management will end sometime in 2021. We want to say clearly that we believe this would create not only a short-term disaster but would critically reduce the long-term success of the programs we I have just highlighted. Continuing to invest in the hotels while simultaneously funding the innovative solutions identified is the only humane option. This is not to say suggest we don't have problems at the hotels with so many people congregating, but we are working on that through a joint approach of security and supports with other community partners. Certainly, it is a costly solution but we have the opportunity in this moment to permanently reinvent our system so that the likelihood of homelessness will be greatly reduced and the quality of life for our neighbors will be greatly improved.

Before I close, I do want to speak briefly to the AHSs proposal to transfer the GA hotel funds to each county. Although we understand there is much more to discuss and understand about this proposed program, we want to say at this time, our task force has very serious concerns and we do not support the proposal. We will be pleased to testify more specifically in the future.

In closing, I want to thank the committees for your time today, your dedication to helping our most vulnerable Vermonters and your support over many years. We

certainly can say these are challenging times. They are. But for too many Vermonters every day is a struggle that begins and ends with a worry about whether they will be able to rest with a roof over their head and a warm bed. Too often, we stigmatize individuals and families experiencing homelessness. We believe that focusing on housing our neighbors as a systemic challenge is a moral imperative for Vermont. Moving the conversation from homeless to un housed neighbors speaks to the need to address the system as a whole. With that, we stand ready to get to work. Thank you.