



Senate Committee on Health and Welfare

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Testimony on Bill H.720 by:
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Thank you. My name is Elise Haydon and I have served as the Executive Director of the Yellow House Community since its inception in 2019. I began my career in Special Education in 2006, as a paraprofessional, then personal care and respite provider, and eventually Special Educator. Not only am I passionate about supporting and advocating for individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, I am someone who has worn many different employment hats within the field of developmental services. I understand the needs of the individual, of their parents and guardians, and of the staff members who support them; this has helped guide me in the development of systems to serve the Yellow House Community. In my previous role as a High School Special Educator, I was intimately aware of the reality my students and their guardians faced when transitioning from school to adult life – that services were sparse and choices limited. The need for more options is what compelled me to help build the Yellow House Community and what brought me here today.

I appreciate you inviting me to provide input on Bill H.720. I want to be clear that my feedback is specific to Sections 4, 5, and 7. These are the sections that relate to the creation of the Residential Program Developer position, the development of pilot planning grants, and the amendment to the HCBS service spending plan for FMAP monies.

I want to start by stating my enthusiastic support for Bill H.720. As you've heard from so many of your constituents, our state is in desperate need of alternative residential models for individuals with DD. With this bill, you are taking the first, critical steps toward discovering and implementing solutions. This is progress!

I would like to take a few minutes to help you understand the role our alternative residential model, the Yellow House Community, plays in supporting the DD population and why it is critical to pass Bill H.720 to facilitate the creation of new models such as ours.

Yellow House Community is a licensed Therapeutic Community Residence (TCR) for adults with DD. We subcontract with our local Designated Agency, CSAC, to provide Home and Community-Based Support to our residents. Yellow House is addressing the need for stable and safe housing, supported community

engagement, and meaningful vocation for Vermont’s adult DD population who require 24-hour support. **We are an intentional community immersed in and supported by the broader Middlebury community.**

Here are some specifics about the Yellow House Community (YHC):

- YHC currently has four (4) residents in Dwelling Unit #1 and is working to renovate Dwelling Unit #2 to accommodate an additional four (4) residents for a total capacity of eight (8) residents with DD.
- YHC currently employs 12 staff a combination of full and part-time to support Dwelling Unit #1 24/7.
- Residence at Yellow House is primarily funded through residents’ Medicaid Waivers and SSI. While we do fundraise, we are “need-blind” and do not require families to make up the difference between their loved one’s public funding and the actual cost of living at Yellow House.
- Yellow House residents who are publicly funded are at or below the poverty level (otherwise they would not qualify for public funding).
- Yellow House is a non-profit organization with 501c3 tax status.
- At Yellow House, our residents need 24/7 care. That means they require support and supervision all hours of the day. The needs of our residents include personal care support (for example: bathing, shaving, toileting), meal preparation and assistance with eating, as well as medication preparation and administration. They need communication support, behavioral support, and emotional support. They are vulnerable adults who need help navigating the community, managing and spending money, and being safe inside and outside of their homes. They need transportation to be provided, or assistance to use public transportation. They also need support to engage with peers and participate in activities of their choice.

Why do options like Yellow House and the communities that will be envisioned through pilot planning grants need to exist?

- We are an alternative to the Shared Living Provider model (adult foster care) for adults with DD who need 24-hour support. Parents, guardians, advocates, and self-advocates are desperately seeking alternatives and housing "choices" for their loved ones.
- Designated Agencies are urgently seeking housing options for their clients as there aren’t enough Shared Living Providers to support the current need.
- Living in a Shared Living Provider situation can be isolating for an individual with DD and is not suitable for many adults with DD.

How can alternatives like Yellow House help solve the housing crisis for adults with DD?

- Help our state develop a sustainable model for supportive housing that can be **replicated**.
- Inform a review and hopefully legislation that considers an integrated, possibly multi-agency, funding solution (Medicaid, SSI, AND HOUSING) – this is why we are here today
- Move away from the Crisis response – there will always be instances of crisis, but with more intentional communities for which families and DA s can plan the future for individuals, we can lift many of these situations out of crisis and decrease costs, which always higher when operating in crisis mode.
- Contribute to workforce development – alternatives like YH have the potential to train and provide continuing education to a caregiver workforce in a collective and supportive way. Working together in a group setting is more productive and builds redundancy and resilience. It can also be more satisfying professionally and a lot of fun! Currently, the State’s FMAP Spending plan outlines over \$15 Million to quote “ensure an accessible and high-quality workforce for Vermonters with HCBS needs” via effective recruitment and retention initiatives. With the right staffing model and

leadership, small organizations such as Yellow House are contributing to HCBS workforce development for free.

- Help re-consider the System of Care funding requirements (again pre-empt the crisis situation) to make it easier for those in need to find solutions and find CHOICE.
- Create a road map and provide consulting to other family groups, DA s, others who want to develop residential options.

My experience directing our innovative residential community allows me to view this bill through a unique lens. I have the following suggestions for improving the bill to maximize impact:

1. **Grant allocation - Section 4, subsection 5 of the bill states that funding will be appropriated to DAIL to develop housing and residential service pilot planning grants in at least three regions of the State, and that the DAIL shall not issue more than one grant per designated agency catchment area. I suggest that this bill not limit the grants by number or geographical area. The \$500,000 should be spent where it can have impact!** Different groups are at different stages in the process and there may be two important, diverse, and viable options within one DA catchment area. Let's not limit progress because there aren't viable planning projects in different catchment areas.

2. **Steering Committee - Section 5, subsection c, speaks to a steering committee to provide advice and guidance as it develops and selects pilot planning grants. That committee should include direct support workers. I would suggest a minimum of two.** In my experience, the only way these new models will be successful is with a dedicated workforce. Direct support workers know what is working for them in the Home and Community Based Services system and what is not! They know what a supportive work environment looks and feels like, and what will help sustain a happy and healthy workforce. They know the needs of the individuals they support and how to meet them. They know what is being missed by all of us well-intentioned managers! They should have a voice at the table.

Finally, I want to echo Andrea Murray's comments related to accountability and long-term planning. In her testimony, she recommended that the Housing Developer should analyze the current funding system and offer options for making adjustments to existing systems. One clear takeaway from my past two years of operating Yellow House is that the current funding system (where a resident is funded for home supports based on the Shared Living Provider model – anywhere from about \$18,000 - \$36,000 per year) is **inadequate** to support a resident in a licensed TCR facility such as Yellow House. In comparison, a group home resident may receive upwards of \$70,000 per year for home supports, simply because the facility (with the same TCR license) is designated as a Group Home. The funding system has to change to address the indirect costs associated with licensed community settings. The funding gap (the difference between the real cost of supporting a resident and the funding provided through the HCBS Waiver) is significant and can't be overcome by fundraising or family support alone. **This is the work that the state must commit to doing so that future models can be financially sustainable; this should be reflected in the bill.**

In closing, Bill H.720 provides an opportunity to come together to envision and create meaningful living and working situations that are bright and forward-thinking – that integrate our most needy with their community and in turn teach tolerance and break down the stigma of what it means to have a developmental disability. The time is now! On behalf of the Yellow House Community, thank you considering our testimonies.