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Testimony – H. 132 – Recognize and Protect the Rights of Unhoused Vermonters

Honorable Chair, Vice Chair and representatives of this committee thank you so much for having me here today. My name is Paul Dragon, and I am the Executive Director of the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity (CVOEO). At CVOEO We operate 10 distinct yet interconnected programs that provide emergency services like shelter, housing, food, and warmth as well as services to help people gain economic independence like Head Start, Microbusiness Development, Personal Finance classes and Weatherization. We are a proud member of the Vermont Community Action Partnership, comprised of the five community action agencies that work together on anti-poverty efforts. At CVOEO, in the last three years, in addition to the ongoing operations of a domestic violence shelter, we have taken on two new homeless shelters, opened a large Community Resource Center for people experiencing homelessness, created a homeless outreach team in two of our service regions, developed a statewide rapid rehousing program for 200 families experiencing homelessness, and we provide social services at the new Elmwood Emergency Shelter. In addition, we recently received a large philanthropic award to continue our work to solve child homelessness in Vermont over the next five years. We have done this additional work because of the unprecedented levels of homelessness in Vermont.

Some people claim that the unsheltered are a threat to the community. Here is some data. At our Community Resource Center (CRC), we support on average 120 people a day many of whom are unsheltered, most unhoused and the rest are living on the margins. 247 people using the CRC report being unsheltered. In the morning you will see guests lined up after a cold night out with some needing basic wound care, and some with chronic medical conditions including diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease. We have an aging population of unsheltered individuals with 14 % of the guests between the ages of 55 and 62 and 14 % of the guests over the age of 62. Fifty-three percent of the guests have a disability which is likely underreported. Given this demographic, I think the threat is exactly the opposite and we are the threat to the unsheltered and to the community because we have failed to build a long-term, integrated, and holistic system to solve homelessness along with the legal and moral framework of H -132.

When I was a young United States Peace Corps Volunteer, I was given a pocket -sized booklet of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was presented to us by the United

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States Ambassador to Mali, West Africa when we completed our in-service training just outside of Bamako the capital. Article 25 articulates the right to adequate housing. Articles 1 and 2 state that homelessness violates the principle of human dignity. I think the ambassador meant the declaration to be aspirational for Mali and I think it should not only be aspirational but operationalized for the United States and for Vermont.

Human rights are the heart of our civic life. Communities are ecosystems in which everything is connected; what happens in one part affects the whole part. The same with people; what happens to one person is bound to affect us all. If you ever saw a child looking at a person sleeping on the street for the first time, then you will know that homelessness is both cruel and unimaginable and not something that can be swept away. If we don't pass H -132 then we don't set the moral and ethical expectations for our children and for our communities. If we don't pass H – 132 then we don't pass the human rights test for our state.

In my experience the cause of homelessness is due to the lack of housing and economic hardship, so I can't understand why we punish people for living outside. Of course, we must let unsheltered people move freely in public spaces in the same way others can. I think one short-term harm reduction measure is to create and encourage safe camping and parking sites on state-owned and town owned land as well as land owned by religious institutions. Why would we keep moving a mother and child sleeping in a car from one place to another or move people with disabilities, from one place to the next. I don't think out of sight and out of mind has ever been an effective policy or practice. Established sites would alleviate some of this anxiety and pain and it would make outreach and services more effective.

When we pass this bill of rights, we will have greater protections for one of the most vulnerable populations in the United States. According to a in depth study by the National Homeless Council -The prevalence of violence victimization in the homeless population has been estimated to range from 14% to 21% and approximately one-third report having witnessed a physical attack on another person who was homeless (Fitzpatrick, LaGory, & Ritchey, 1999; Lee & Schreck, 2005). This rate of violence is highly disparate when compared to the general population in which only 2% report experiencing a violent crime (Truman, 2011). According to the National Homeless Mortality Review -The estimate of 5,800- 46,500 deaths among people experiencing homelessness per year highlights the vast, and largely hidden, scale of homeless deaths. The wide range is due to counties unable or unwilling to collect the information.

In Los Angeles in 2021, 85 people were murdered in one year. In Kalise, Montana, the county commissioners wrote an open letter to the community last year, warning that providing shelter or resources to homeless people would "enable" them and entice more of them into the area. The letter unleashed a punishing public backlash, with reports that groups of young people were roaming through homeless encampments and tormenting those living there. Many of the unsheltered are longtime locals displaced by the skyrocketing housing costs caused by the nearness of ski resorts. Just like most people here are from or have strong ties to Vermont.

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In Vermont a homeless bill of rights will establish a moral and ethical framework for everyone in our community. It will also say to the people doing this difficult and at times traumatic work, thank you for having our back and now, as a state, we have yours.