

## **H 675 Grants for Permanent Supportive Housing**

Bill Introduction, Representative Michelle Bos-Lun .

H 675 will enable various entities around Vermont: municipalities, non-profits, or other organizations to apply for grants to purchase existing buildings and to transform them into permanent supportive housing units. Many, perhaps most of the residents in this model will be individuals transitioning from homelessness, but it could meet the needs of other populations who have been unstably housed as well. I'd like to note, that while the title is "permanent supportive housing" for many individuals it may actually be transitional housing: after a year or more living in this model, individuals often move on to other stable living situations, having developed skills needed to maintain housing. As the title indicates, for those who could benefit from a permanent placement, staying long term is also possible.

This bill proposes that grants be given to transition existing buildings around the state into efficiency apartment complexes. Each living unit could have a sleeping/sitting room, a kitchenette and a bathroom. Shared spaces in another part of the complex would provide laundry facilities, public meeting rooms for socializing or group meetings and offices for two support staff who would be available at least 8 hours a day.

The idea is that housing will be developed to provide a safe, secure living space as well as support staff to help residents adapt to the expectations required to maintain housing as a tenant. A number of individuals in this type of housing model often struggle with mental or physical health challenges. They may have other life experience challenges that can make it difficult to take the steps required to maintain housing. Policies like not housing extra guests, paying rent by a certain day, applying to renew benefits that will continue food and housing subsidies, and other issues can be difficult for people who have recently transitioned into a home with a lease or rental agreement after one or more periods of homelessness.

For individuals who have been unhoused, meeting basic needs has been the priority. Keeping track of appointments to support recovery or address other health needs, or following up with filing of documents and payments has not been the priority day by day for individuals who have been paying attention to their most basic needs and sometimes those of their friends: how to keep warm and dry and fed. When stable housing becomes available: meeting deadlines is required and priorities shift for individuals. Getting connected and if needed, reminded of resources in the community that can help people maintain physical and mental wellness, can enable new tenants to transition successfully to a stable living situation.

In H 675, two staff members are available at each site at least 8 hours daily to support residents' needs. This is a critical part of the model. One of the staff members would be a case manager who could connect residents with resources that promote health and stability: keeping Medicaid and Three Squares applications up to date, checking in about physical and mental health appointments, advising about suitable work or educational opportunities and more. The second staff member could also provide some of those services, but could offer other services:

from helping report maintenance needs, to helping residents plan and run programs on site, from recovery support meetings, to healthy cooking classes, to social events or holiday celebrations. Having support staff available to help individuals adapt to housing expectations can make the difference in whether housing can be continued for an individual or lost.

After the Legislative session adjourned, in June 2023 I began working at Groundworks Collaborative in Brattleboro with individuals who did not have permanent housing. Some people I worked with stayed in a congregate shelter, some lived outside, some lived in hotels. I also worked with some individuals in a permanent supportive housing site that had been transitioned from an old motel. I filled in for weeks and sometimes months in various roles as needed. Most of that time I was a case manager working for an agency that served mostly unhoused individuals in southern Vermont and provided a range of supportive services.

As I worked with individuals in varied settings last summer and fall, I helped them complete applications for healthcare services, long term housing, and more. I connected them with doctors and helped them make medical appointments and arrange rides to appointments. Some of these people had not had basic medical care in many years. I had the opportunity to learn about the challenges that so many individuals in communities around Vermont face: people who have experienced trauma, people living with mental health conditions, individuals struggling with substance use disorders, or fleeing domestic violence. All of the people I encountered in my work lived in poverty. Some had jobs, others were unable to maintain employment.

Individuals who have lived without stable housing in Vermont face a multitude of challenges and even if housing becomes available, they don't always have the skills to maintain housing. Connecting them with programs and services can help move their lives in a different, more stable direction. This is the type of work that a case manager in a permanent supportive housing site would do.

The final placement I had working at Groundworks was a placement working with recently housed individuals in a permanent supportive housing site where more than two dozen individuals who had been homeless, lived in individual, private rooms with access to shared spaces including a large shared meeting space. The model was not identical to what H 675 proposes, but it was similar. The last day I worked at that location before returning to full time legislative responsibilities I had the pleasure to help prepare, serve and eat a Thanksgiving meal with residents and staff. Looking around the long connected row of tables that we moved so we could all eat together I witnessed not only gratitude for the meal, but I also heard individuals sharing how much they appreciated having a safe, warm place to live and friends and neighbors to enjoy a meal with. I heard from many individuals how different this was for them from previous years when they didn't have a table and a hot meal nor a room of their own to return to.

I had been in a temporary case manager role at that site and knew many of the stories of the individuals gathered around the table and the challenges they faced. I knew how far they had

come and some difficulties they were still facing. But looking around the long table and knowing that all these people had been homeless in most cases a year or less before, but that they had a safe and stable place to live, made a strong impact. I thought about the other individuals I had worked with who were still staying in tents, or sleeping outside, or some who stayed sheltered overnight at the Drop In Shelter. I thought about the individuals I had worked with who were temporarily housed in hotels. It was clear to me that we need more permanent supportive housing to transition people to stable housing.

An example of how I envision this bill could work, has been demonstrated in Rutland over the past two years. A former bike shop was transformed into eight one bedroom apartments now housing formerly homeless veterans. The cost was \$500,000. The residents get support through case management with Veterans service organizations, including one in Rutland. According to a 2023 report by the Rutland Regional Planning Commission, Rutland county has 2,400 vacant homes. Stephen Box, a leader on the veteran housing project believes "Many of those can be returned to the marketplace with minimal to no renovation work." 2,400 is a number just for Rutland county. Undoubtedly there are many other structures available that could be transitioned to meet housing needs around the state. With over 1,500 households still sheltered in hotels, we need to find and transition more buildings as soon as possible. (Number from a State of Vermont report 12/12/23)

Communities know or can figure out which sites could be best transitioned into permanent supportive housing models. Then either a non-profit, housing agency or a municipality could apply for a grant to transition the building into housing. This model will be more cost effective and likely more rapid than building new units. The retrofitting to meet clean energy standards will also provide training opportunities to help Vermont's contractors and others who work in construction and energy installation, learn how to upgrade old buildings to meet clean energy standards. I have been in touch with an organization, SEON, Sustainable Energy Outreach Network which could provide training in these areas, benefiting future energy efficiency and clean energy as well as housing needs.

H 675 would have the Agency of Human Services offer grants for 4.5 million dollars annually to provide transitions of existing buildings into energy efficient, stable, supportive housing options through the General Fund. This could result in 4-9 new projects being developed and run annually around the state.

The housing crisis in Vermont affects individuals at every need level from people who are homeless to professionals, to retirees. This proposal will not address all the housing needs, but it will help many who are currently in hotels or in other unstable housing. This model could also be used to provide stable housing for other individuals needing supportive housing, such as recovery housing or housing for elders needing some supports but not needing a full time residential care facility.

Part of the mission of the organization I worked with in southern Vermont included these words:

“We envision a community in which all people have their basic needs met, including a safe and dignified place to call home”. I want that for all Vermonters and am hopeful that this bill might provide one way that could happen,