

Testimony of Sue Minter

Executive Director, Capstone Community Action

Before the House Committee on General and Military Affairs

April 12, 2023

Good morning and thank you for the invitation to speak with you in support of S. 100

For the record I am Sue Minter, Executive Director of Capstone Community Action, a community-based anti-poverty non-profit established in 1965 serving Washington, Lamoille and Orange Counties. Capstone and is one of five (5) Community Action Agencies in Vermont that make up the Vermont Community Action Agency Partnership (VCAP).

It is clear from every level that we have a severe housing shortage in Vermont. And this shortage is negatively affecting every region of our state. Lack of a stable and growing housing supply means that Vermont's economy faces stagnation without adequate ability for attracting a diverse and growing workforce which threatens business growth and community vitality. The shortage of housing affects all strata of our state.

Vermont needs to rapidly scale up housing and housing density of all types and at all income levels, as quickly as possible.

Capstone Community Action is a community action agency on the front lines in the war on poverty here in Vermont. I would like to share how this crisis affects the most vulnerable Vermonters – those who are without housing or may be at risk of losing their housing.

Over 11, 000 Vermonters will walk through one of our many doors this year seeking healthy food, warmth during our harsh winters, early education programs for vulnerable at-risk children and for help navigating what is best described as a byzantine route of navigation to keep or find a roof over their head. Our frontline housing support worked with 523 families during our last fiscal year.

As a housing service provider serving Washington, Orange and Lamoille Counties we see Vermonters who come to our doors in desperation. They come from all walks of life. We see senior citizens, families with kids, single working adults, people with disabilities. All are bound together by the common thread of homelessness or on the verge of losing the stability of a home. We use the word crisis, but these numbers may tell a more powerful story.

Right now, there are 375 adults and children sheltered at the motels in Washington County. In Lamoille County, 168 adults and 55 children were in the motels. Across the state there are over 2200 adults and 620 children who are living in the area hotels. After July 1st their fates are unknown.

Capstone staff provides support services, case management and other key tools to lift Vermonters into stable shelter situations. In Orange County, Capstone helped support fledgling programs such as emergency shelter in public spaces and affordable housing projects to secure pathways to both temporary and permanent housing.

Over the past five months of service, our housing staff worked with 212 households in search of housing, but only 35 found safe and affordable long-term housing. This is because there simply is NO AVAILABLE housing for the folks who are unhoused. Despite the new vouchers, the Section 8 program and the availability of a lifeline, there is literally no place to throw the life preserver. After years of working tirelessly to get our clients into the Vt Emergency Rental Assistance (VERAP) program, we are now faced with letting them know that not only has that program ended, but that there is nowhere for them to go. One Capstone housing counselor person sadly calls the Section 8 simply, “the program of empty promises”.

Coupled with this gaping disparity of available apartments, vouchers and the skyrocketing rents, we understand the reason why Vermont was ranked second in the country, second only to California for rate of homelessness. As hard as this is right now, I am deeply worried about what lies ahead.

During this month of April a cascade of Pandemic era programs are dissolving or gone. April marks the end of the SNAP/ 3 Squares Emergency Allotment has ended which will affect over 70,000 Vermonters. April is also the end of the Everyone Eats food program, which in Central Vermont alone had been providing

5,000 nutritious meals weekly. This month the Medicaid “unwind” is beginning again affecting low-income Vermonters with health care. The Child Tax credit is also on the chopping block in this body. And then there is VERAP, which not only has helped safely house over 2500 Vermonters in area hotels, it has also provided critical rental assistance for over 10,000 Vermonters. We are only just beginning to see what the effect of removing this rental assistance will mean, as many clients are coming to our aid facing eviction in homes they can no longer afford.

We have not experienced the full impact of these programs ending yet. I am here to tell you that we can’t think we’ll just go back to the way it was pre pandemic. We are now facing a housing market and costs, coupled with high food and fuel that we have not experienced before.

At the same time this tsunami is brewing, The GA program is on the precipice of exiting more people from the motels during the summer than we have ever seen. The guests we support in the GA subsidized motels are elderly and infirm, disabled, living with mental illness, substance abuse, fleeing domestic violence or simply Vermonters who work every day and return home to a motel. While far from a perfect model, these motels have been the lifeline we can’t find in our communities housing stock. Guests have found recovery, jobs, gotten healthy and had their surgeries and found compassion and service providers who believe in their ability to move forward. If these motels close as proposed, we will truly be facing a pandemic of poverty and homelessness across our state.

As Vermonters we need and can do better. Community partners are working together, across the sectors, to present to our legislative leaders potential paths forward to safe and permanent housing. The pandemic and the GA program have taught us important lessons we forget at our peril. We spent too much money and invested too much work to simply give up and conduct business as usual and walk away from the ground we gained over the past three years. We are not willing to concede the possibility we can move these most vulnerable Vermonters to safe and permanent housing.

As difficult as this current situation is, I see hope. I see hope in every victory our staff achieve to help people find a home, a healthy meal, and a job. Across the state the Community Action network served 1,480 individuals experiencing homelessness to find permanent housing during the pandemic. 121 Vermonters

experiencing homelessness were provided emergency housing, and 714 individuals experienced homelessness and were helped to find permanent housing.

I see hope in the hard work that has delivered us this needed legislation in S.100. This bill removes barriers and helps incentivize communities to build more housing and greater density. Removing these barriers will be a critical investment in the long term for Vermonters.

In particular, we strongly support the section Sec. 4412 (1) (H) which prohibits bylaws from penalizing a hotel from renting rooms to provide housing assistance through the state General Assistance programs as well as section 4413 (a)(1) (G) the bill also restricts the ability of communities to prohibit emergency shelters.

We are particularly supportive of this good work and ask that you continue to consider our next steps together to bring sensible, cost-effective solutions to our communities in the best tradition of the Vermont way.

I will conclude with a quote from a client who we helped find safety from homelessness:

“You have given me peace of mind. I did not want to sleep outside in the freezing cold. I truly realize how lucky I am. You’re the best, you took the bull by the horns and saved me. I have been very, very lucky.”

And another client who poignantly notes:

“My community thrives when everyone has a safe, affordable home.”