

Good morning and thank-you for having me.

My name is Amanda Hilliker and I am currently a housing advocate with Voices Against Violence in Franklin and Grand Isle County a program of CVOEO. We are a domestic and sexual violence program and a member of the VT Network.

As we are all aware, the amount of Vermonters and families experiencing homelessness is continuing to grow, while the services are decreasing. I am here today to speak to you about what our homeless survivors are currently experiencing.

In the last couple years, we have had great success with receiving vouchers from programs like CARES, Rapid Rehousing, VSHA and most recently the Emergency Housing Vouchers that were aimed specifically toward homeless survivors fleeing domestic and sexual violence. VT received 99 of these vouchers and were distributed to each county based on population. Franklin/Grand Isle County received 8 of those vouchers and successfully utilized every one of them. The vouchers that were not utilized in time by other counties were then pooled together on a first come first serve basis. And to date we have utilized 4 more and currently have 3 more pending applications. That's 12 Households that are now safe and housed. This funding allows Vermonters and families to attain safety and thrive.

While programs like these are a huge part of housing stability, the lack of housing stock and safe/affordable housing is steadily decreasing. As of yesterday, 1900 households were added to the section 8 waitlist. That waitlist is closing at 430pm on January 23<sup>rd</sup>. 500 vouchers will be getting released and voucher attrition is about 15 per month. Those vouchers will be aimed at households CURRENTLY housed and facing housing instability and not towards the households currently homeless. The HOMES Family Housing Voucher Project will have 100 vouchers for households currently homeless with children. That's 600 vouchers total, with not enough available housing. On top of that, recipients are only given 120 days to secure a unit or they lose that voucher. Extensions are possible under certain circumstances, but 120 days when the housing is so limited already is not enough time and extremely stressful to a survivor already experiencing so much.

Most of our survivors struggle with transportation, and in our rural area the public transportation is extremely limited. Meaning that survivors try to stick locally where its easier to access other services they need. The lack of childcare also plays a role into households being able to self-sustain. How can they work if there is no childcare availability OR if the childcare they can access is almost as much as their paycheck?

My position works directly with folks accessing our emergency housing program. And currently we only have 1 hotel that will work with us. That 1 hotel is also utilized by economic services, making our access to room availability extremely limited. In which case, we have to do a lot of safety planning and refer out to other counties in hopes that they can find emergency housing elsewhere, and often the survivors end up choosing to stay where they are at leading to increased safety concerns. Survivors in Vermont are being murdered by their partners in their homes. DV is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children, as well as people on the gendered spectrum. Housing accessibility is a direct response to preventing lethality.

While COVID-19 was detrimental and created its own chaos, it also helped shine the light on the homelessness that many Vermonters are currently experiencing. It also helped open the door to funding that funded such vouchers like CARES and the Emergency Housing Vouchers. Programs like ours benefited from extra funding that helped us fund more food cards, gas cards, cell phones, safety planning and transportation needs. These items might sound small to some, but quite often meant the safety of a survivor and their children. The funding is coming to a close and is going to create a void that most programs will not be able to fill.

I come to you today not only as an advocate, but also as a survivor that has experienced homelessness after fleeing domestic violence. These programs and funding allowed me to maintain the safety of my children and the stability to go to school, work and open my own business. I now work for the very agency that helped me access those programs and I am now able to pay it forward by helping survivors everyday. After 7 yrs of Being on the section 8 program I was able to give up my voucher and purchase my first home almost 3 yrs ago.

Thank- you for taking the time to listen to my testimony.