

Good morning.

My name is Kathi Partlow and I work at the Family Center of Washington County. Our organization offers several case management programs that serve pregnant and parenting families who are homeless at the time of program entry.

To better serve our participants, in 2015 we entered into a partnership with Downstreet Housing and Community Development. I'm here to talk to you about successful housing partnerships, why they are needed, and what is needed to sustain them over time.

Our housing partnership is successful because we have a shared commitment to serve our community and those experiencing homelessness. Downstreet's mission to provide affordable housing and our mission to house this population are a perfect fit. That's not to say that it doesn't take work!

We have engaged in a mutually beneficial memorandum of understanding that is clear regarding each partner's responsibilities. This keeps our individual organizational roles in check and provides all of us with an understanding of where our desires may run up against programmatic or organizational barriers. In some cases, we can alleviate those barriers, and in others we need to acknowledge that we are all doing the best we can, with the constraints we have, to effectively serve the most families possible.

Downstreet provides housing with a heart, and we endeavor to provide services in the same manner.

In one instance, we had a family of 3, mother and 2 children, housed in a Downstreet unit. This family unit was succeeding (paying rent on time, keeping a nice apartment, good neighborly relationships, starting to save money, and mom was working on her education.) Suddenly, something changed. The property manager mentioned the change in behavior to the case manager which prompted a discussion with the client. The client just needed a bit more support to get through a tough time and more connection to community. The case manager was able to engage on both fronts and the client was able to recover from the setback quite well with a renewed sense of community and a boost in self-esteem that came from the successful bounce back. Without that work, that partnership and caring on all fronts, that situation could have turned out differently. We all know that other, more drastic things, can impact someone's progress but this example illustrates a common commitment to success which is imperative in a strong partnership.

And sometimes things don't work out, despite everyone's best efforts. This is when the ideals of our partnership truly come into play. A housing partner takes on the liability of sometimes taking a chance on a tenant that might not look as good on paper as others. They do this because they believe in the partnership, in second chances, and that people can change. And still -sometimes that doesn't work out.

When that happens, our risk mitigation funds (through the Family Supportive Housing program) have proven to help to ease the financial burden on the housing provider. That can sometimes be a key in this work – the ability to say, we're financially in this with you. These funds are very limited, and increasing them, or as in the current working plan – making them available Statewide may allow for more of our folks, often with little in terms of references for housing, to become housed. This one item may create more housing partnerships with both public and private housing providers and further our common goals of ending homelessness in Vermont.

We are community service providers, those experiencing homelessness, allies, and housers. We are out here, every day, working to help the most vulnerable among us. We do this because we place value in every human being, no matter the circumstances they find themselves in, and in the ideal that housing is a human right. We know you hear about many issues facing the State and the job you face, balancing priorities and budgets is grueling. We are here to inform, and to ask you to prioritize this work. We ask you to incentivize all housing providers to work with us, to continue to fund and expand services for those experiencing homelessness, and to please reach out to us for information and ideas. Do not forget that we are all in this together: those that are in need and those of us who can do something to meet that need. We, too, are in a partnership that needs to rely on honest and consistent communication, role definition, and trust. With the right investments in housing and services homelessness in Vermont will be brief and non-recurring. I am hopeful that, due to partnerships of all kinds, there will be little future need for Homelessness Awareness Days.