

## Homelessness Awareness Day Testimony

Hello, my name is Kim Anetsberger. I am the executive director of the Lamoille Community House, a small seasonal shelter nestled in Hyde Park, Vermont. I've been in my role for almost 3 years and in the field for about 5 years. I've met hundreds of beautiful, valuable people that have been left behind by our systems of care, and it breaks my heart.

I see our system of care as a series of nets, stacked, one above the other, with the holes progressively getting smaller in descending levels. The nets near the top have big holes, intended only to catch those with an implied larger value. As people fall, as they face challenges in their lives, the nets start to catch some people, but allow others to fall through. As the person keeps falling, net after net, the holes being just not quite small enough to stop them from falling again, they end up at the last net, the one with the tightest stitch and the smallest holes, hanging just a few feet above the ground: shelters. But even shelter nets have holes, meaning sometimes we aren't equipped to catch everyone, and people end up bouncing from shelter to shelter, desperately seeking a net that will catch them, doing what they can to survive the best they know how, and ultimately end up outdoors. They've fallen through every net that **we**, as a system, have set up to catch them. These nets that we've set up are there to keep people safe, cared for, alive. At least, that's what we hope for. That's what we intend, but it's not the reality. The reality is that these nets, our systems of care, are inequitable and inadequate. Our country and state were founded in white supremacy, and the systems we work within still operate under those intentions, which means we determine people's value based on their race, class, and abilities. In order to make any change, we need to first recognize how our cultural thinking might have influenced prior decision makers and then make a commitment to ending that cycle of thinking. Not doing so perpetuates a system created to oppress those living in poverty, and there's no progress within that system.

I am a strong believer no one person is to blame for their homelessness. People are homeless because our systems don't catch them when they fall, and dare I say, sometimes our systems even push people down (think of things like the benefits cliff, or a lengthy almost impossible disability application, or housing disparities among our BIPOC community). Our systems were created by those who benefit from people being stuck in poverty. The fact that we have record numbers of people experiencing homelessness is not a surprise, it's a result of a system that benefits from the oppression of certain groups.

We need a system that will be accountable and responsible for fixing these issues. Right now, our systems turn to the shelter providers to provide a life saving service for people who have no other options since every other net was made to avoid catching them. Shelters are asked to provide these services with less funding than it takes to do the work.

When homeless shelters are asked to leverage 30% or more of our operating budgets every year, I have a hard time seeing that as an efficient use of our resources. We are providing a service that meets our vulnerable Vermonters' basic needs for survival, we are literally keeping

people alive, at the very least. We are providing a service that is needed **because** our systems don't allow for everyone to be helped.

We need to think about where the responsibility for funding our programs lie. Most of our donations are 100 dollars or less, why is it the responsibility of medium to low income families to make sure the shelter's lights are on? The responsibility lies with the system that created the issue. It's not the fault of anyone here that these systems are this way, but it is our responsibility to recognize the way they are, be accountable for the results they've produced, and make decisions that support a better system of care.

A step in that direction is fully funding shelter providers because they are providing a life-saving service. We also need better funding for service providers in related fields. When our local agencies providing housing counseling, housing retention, and other important case management services are under funded, it impacts our shared clientele drastically. We have unsupported and burnt out case managers with unmanageably large caseloads, waitlists for our clients, and high turnover rates. This then creates instability for those we serve, which impacts their ability to make progress towards their goals, resulting in them staying in our system of care longer. As more people enter the system and not many are moving out of it, the problem worsens and snowballs for the case managers and the clients. Providing inadequate funding is not only disrespectful to the people on the ground doing the work, it's extremely harmful and dismissive to those that rely on these services.

I see our unhouse population as an untapped resource with so much potential. The people I have met in my years of working in this field are some of the smartest, most resourceful, and giving people I've ever met. I can't even imagine how much they might be able to contribute to our workforce, economy, and community wellness if they were given the opportunity, if they had just been allowed to be caught by that first net. We need to invest in this population.

Our shelter had a house meeting recently where it was brought up that things didn't feel fair when it came to the upkeep and tidying of the shared spaces. The group worked together to create a new way of addressing chores that they all felt good about. Receiving input from our shelter guests on how our shelter should run is so important. It tells our guests that we value their opinions and experiences. That we value THEM as people. This is the kind of thing I would love to pour more resources into. Program development informed by shelter guest feedback. Staff training opportunities, better service provision, and enhanced collaboration with partner agencies. When we spend our valuable and limited resources on fundraising in order to just keep our doors open, we are telling the people we serve that less than adequate attention and programming is what they deserve. Proper funding means an investment in this population, and more importantly, it's a decision that comes from the belief that these people have value. Thank you.