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Upper Valley Haven

Testimony to Vermont House and Senate Committees

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Thank you, Chair Ram Hinsdale and greetings to our good friend, Senator Clarkson. My name is Michael Redmond and I'm the Executive Director of the Upper Valley Haven located in Hartford. I also serve on the Board of the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness and the steering committee of the Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition.

I've been asked to be in the anchor position in our time for testimony today, Homelessness Awareness Day. My thanks to my colleagues who preceded me. They were eloquent and passionate describing the work their agencies perform each day. I think they were also modest about their own achievements over the past three years in keeping their heads up and eyes down simultaneously, inspiring their teams, keeping their staffing in place so shelters could stay open, taking on new challenges and programs to meet the moment.

Also, our thanks to the people with personal experience of being without a home who testified. Their voices are essential and I have to believe that their descriptions of their life experiences will stay with you for some time.

I also want to pay tribute to our leaders and the rank and file in state government. I start with the Governor and legislature for learning to be bold in vision and opportunistic in efforts to keep us healthy and productive and believing that tomorrow we'll emerge stronger and united.

While the entire body of administrative agencies also deserve praise, I want to single out our partners in the Agency for Children & Families, Office of Economic Opportunity and Economic Services Division which we work with most closely through funding of the shelters, supportive housing, transitional housing and temporary housing. In its support for the shelter network and the people we serve who are homeless and at risk of homelessness, the agencies were creative, dedicated, tireless, understanding and open to hearing and taking necessary actions when there were ways we believed they could do better.

So here we are. You've heard testimony of the challenges ahead of us all. Still with over 1300 households in motels through the Transitional Housing Program which is scheduled to end at on March 31. Almost 500 households in the General Assistance Emergency Housing Program, some there only through adverse weather conditions and another 500 people in emergency shelters. The Point In Time count of people experiencing homelessness next week will likely find continued high levels never experienced prior to the pandemic.

We need to ask at this moment, and this is the one question I hope you remember – Is everything being done to avoid drastic consequences when the Transitional Housing Program ends on March 31?

Some basics you'll continue to hear but are worth repeating. Shelters save lives. The solution to homelessness is more housing that is affordable with services tailored to help people get and keep housing with connections to employment and health services especially. That is the three-legged stool.

You have an important role of course all of this. Fortunately, after years of significant underfunding there is a wave of funding in the pipeline for new housing. The Governor has announced his wish to see barriers to building more housing contained in state and local regulations removed. Some of that certainly involves legislation and administrative rules. I encourage you to be bold and laser focused on that. And while the COVID funding has filled that pipeline for now, we need to think about the future a few years from now when those funds will have been expended and the problem will be far from solved.

More immediately, I ask you to focus on shelters and services, the work that saves lives and give people hope. This is the work that you've heard my colleagues speak about so eloquently this morning. I'd like to focus on one issue that is most vexing to us – staffing. We're open 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. It has become increasingly challenging to find enough staff to do this essential work. And the staff that have been doing this very hard work can lose faith that there's a future for them. One direct way to change this is through providing the funding that will allow us to pay a living wage, the housing wage to the people who are helping provide access to housing. As we look to expand shelter beds in the state, that also requires the investment in ongoing funding for additional staff, services and the overhead costs. When ACD asks for the funds to do the job you want them to do, please listen and support the budgets that are needed.

Lastly, it was almost 6 years ago to the day that the [Roadmap to End Homelessness](#) was submitted to multiple committees in the legislature by then AHS Deputy Secretary Paul Dragon. \$40,000 was appropriated and additional matching funding was secured to complete this report by engaging the Corporation for Supportive Housing, national experts. I read it again in preparation for this meeting. The analysis of the status of the problem, then recent history of addressing the problem and recommendations for future actions have held up remarkably well. I encourage you, especially those of you who are new members of the legislature, to read this report. Much has been accomplished –

- the increase in supportive housing programs through Family Supportive Housing and targeted programs to individuals with mental health conditions
- the use of community-based solutions to draw together partnerships between affordable housing developers and organizations providing services to people who are unhoused. The new A Way Home project is a great example.

- the build out of the coordinated entry program and Homeless Management Information System has hard-wired the practices that are fair and equitable and provide data for analysis that didn't exist before
- the increase in affordable rental housing with goals for targeting homeless populations that surpass the 15% goal of the report

I would ask that after six years, it is a good time to acknowledge not only what has been accomplished, but also what remains undone. What was missed then and remains important now? What have we learned that we should emphasize and invest in?

Should we undertake a new project to update this report that takes into account the changes that have taken place, new ideas and new priorities?

Here are some thoughts for your consideration:

- We should continue to increase opportunities for supportive housing with case management services to include more individuals and not only those with diagnosed mental health conditions. The new state Medicaid plan provides the opportunity to take on this expansion, but matching funds are required.
- The report is silent on the changes needed at the state and local levels that hinder the development of affordable housing and workforce housing. These regulatory barriers must be removed. Both incentives and penalties should be considered. Legal action is certain follow with unknown consequences if we don't take this on at both the state and municipalities. The report by three regional planning organizations in the Upper Valley called [Keys to the Valley](#) is a tremendous blueprint for how towns can encourage development while not losing their character.
- Included in solutions around supply of housing more focus on manufactured homes and tiny homes should be added to bring down the price points of adding new units of housing.
- In services to people who are unhoused, the use of pods for temporary housing that is now being tried in Burlington could provide a model for future development that isn't reliant on motels. Much to be learned.
- A technical detail but an important one -- if there are opportunities to support changes to the Fair Market Rent federal standards in high rent rural areas of the state through regulatory changes, we should seize that opportunity. The increasing rents in the Upper Valley make it difficult to find units that meet the FMR threshold which is set at levels that don't correspond to market rate.
- Additional funding for shelter expansion projects, upgrades and more complete funding of shelter operations. Too much of our operating budgets to provide shelter need to be raised from private funds. And additional funding will help us hire and retain the staff that who are dedicated to this work, but need to have housing-level wages.

Thank you.