

Corwin Chase Testimony: 2/16/2024 House Human Services

For the record my name is Corwin Chase and I live in Rutland Vermont. I am a person living with Autism. However, I did not have a formal diagnosis as an adult until recently and I don't have SSI or SSDI. I will get into this more later.

I want to start by saying that I was raised in a religious background and also with a history of abuse. I tend to be someone who wants to be thankful for whatever someone or the state does or was trying to do, even when it seems like people are not trying hard enough. So, when thinking about what to say today, I was having a hard time at first telling my story. However, I think it is extremely important that you hear my story, so, I am going to try extremely hard to just tell my story and tell you what would have helped me and was not available.

I became homeless because my mom and I lived in a trailer that was condemned. My mom was the tenant in this case. We entered the hotel program in November of 2022. But in early 2023 my mom left the hotel, abandoning me there and to this day, I don't know where she is. I have no idea. I was first diagnosed with Autism as a child, but, that diagnosis, I did not even know that there was a diagnosis. I was shocked when I found out later.

I have a mindset that is kind of like a child. I don't know how to do simple adult tasks without support. I can live on my own, but I need support throughout daily living to learn how to meet basic needs, to help fill out paperwork and to guide what I am doing. For example, when I try to make an appointment or navigate a system of support. I am not able to do that on my own. Also, I have been seeking support learning how to cook, but that is not something I can learn on my own. My mom knew this and yet she left me on my own. At the time, I was relying on her food stamps and when she left it was someone on staff at the hotel and another person who lives there that helped me apply and until I met Rebecca, I did not have the support I needed going to pick up or buy groceries and now I rely on other supports to do the same.

It was in May that I learned that I would be exited on June 1st from the hotel. That was because I was not categorized under having a disability, even though I do. And my mom's condemned house, I was told, did not count as me having lived in a condemned house. I was introduced to End Homelessness Vermont when I wanted to tell my story, so that all of you would know that I might have nowhere to go if this program ended. But, when Brenda learned my story, she asked if she could help to try to get me into the right category so that I would remain until July 1st and ultimately in the Cohort. It took weeks, but I was notified just before June 15th that I would be able to stay. It was then for the first time since I had been in the program, that there was some support system surrounding me. Rebecca continued to provide support with basic needs for quite a while, including helping me get to BROCC to get a phone.

End Homelessness Vermont, connected me to Life Intervention Team (LIT) and they asked LIT to help me get an official diagnosis for my disability. Lit at the time was running a hotel and I had decided to move to the hotel that they ran so that I would have daily connection with my support. But, that was a choice that I was offered, not a requirement, and it was one that made

sense for me. Every step of the way, the organizations I am now connected to have given me choice, explained my options and allowed me to decide what my next steps are. LIT connected me to Rutland Mental Health, where I now have a case manager. All three organizations worked to help me to get the adult diagnosis that I now have. It was in this process that I found out that there was a diagnosis that was previous. The previous one though was from too long ago and it had to be redone. Unfortunately LIT no longer runs the hotel that I am in. They left kind of suddenly and it triggered my feelings of abandonment, even though I know they were dealing with their own financial constraints. If I didn't have the support of Rutland Mental Health, my case manager Ross, as well as Rebecca and Brenda, I don't think I would be in a place to share my story today. Because I was feeling pretty badly and it really was making me feel a lot the trauma of my family abandoning me. Again, I know that LIT was doing what they had to, but those of us in this program are constantly left without the support we need, with no real explanation.

Nobody communicates with us about what is happening. Many of us have experienced lots of trauma and we are expected to roll with whatever next happens. It would help if there was a requirement, at least for the state to give us notice about what is happening next, in a timely manner. Or notice when we will be exited. It would be good if we had clarity about how we were allowed to appeal decisions. If there was an easily readable guide of the program so that we understood rules, verifications needed and our rights. I was just thrown into homelessness and a shelter program with a disability that the program does not recognize just because I don't have SSI or SSDI.

Currently, I am trying to qualify for a bridge housing program, but to qualify, I have to have a referral from Homeless Prevention. However, I did my coordinated entry with BROCC and that is because Homeless Prevention had too big a backlog and now I can't get into this program because Homeless Prevention won't write the recommendation, because I am with BROCC, but, the recommendation can't come from BROCC and the only reason I am with BROCC was because of the Homeless Prevention backlog. I imagine that I am not the only person fighting this barrier. Somehow I have to get BROCC to discharge me to Homeless Prevention to get this recommendation and this is open Bridge Housing that is available now.

Also, I am working to get SSI and SSDI, however, that is a big decision because having that will limit the amount that I am allowed to work and I may want to work. I shouldn't have to give up my right to work in order to qualify for housing, but due to the rules, I am feeling pushed into this. I know that End Homelessness Vermont is making a referral to Vermont Center For Independent Living, so that I can get a Peer Advocate Counselor who also can help me get SSI or SSDI faster if I choose to, because right now, even if I choose to, I can't get an appointment until months from now, is my understanding. I am not sure the exact date.

The two things that I want to leave you with most are:

1. There needs to be more communication. You can't just throw paperwork at people and expect them to understand it or be able to do it. We are expected with no support to

know what is happening and just go with last minute changes to our survival. There was one time that I got paperwork that talked about income contributions and I didn't understand it, and thought I had to make income to stay. I then felt hopeless that I would not be able to stay in the program. I am sure to a lot of people it would be common sense, but, my disability doesn't allow me to have that kind of common sense. Luckily Brenda was watching my voucher and she found me and asked why I hadn't renewed. I told her and she and a staff member at the hotel explained that this only applied IF I had income. If she hadn't been watching or the hotel hadn't reached out to her, I don't know which happened, I would have just been outside. I couldn't manage that on my own.

2. Please count people like me as people with disabilities. There are so many of us in this program who don't have SSI or SSDI, but need as much support as someone who does. We should have to give up our right to work or have figured out how to navigate a complicated system, like a rat in a maze, in order to qualify. People can easily tell by the sound of my voice or communication style that I am living with a disability. It doesn't make me less than others, but it does make me need a different kind of support. I could have had a provider or found a doctor to verify my disability, but as of now, I am feeling pushed into ssi or ssdi, because I am worried that this will be the only way I don't end up on the street. I don't know the right way to do that, but, I am asking you to make sure that you do.

I want to say that it was months after being in the hotel that I found one organization, that then connected me to another organization and then another. It was not until one person realized that I needed support that I got the support I needed to get to a place where there is even an opportunity for an apartment or bridge housing. People like me are not able to figure this out on our own, again not because we can't live on our own, but because we need support. The system for us to get this help is messed up, it is complicated. It is hard to navigate for anyone and certainly it was for me. It needs to be a lot more straightforward and we need to be given more options for support right at the gate, instead of it taking forever for people to figure it out. And we need to be given more choices.

Brenda tells me that this committee has been doing good work, and I am very glad to hear it. I hope that you keep hearing from people like us about what we need and what would help us most. It means a lot to be invited here and be given the opportunity to tell my story.

Thank you very much.