

Katherine Frazine Testimony: 2/16/2024 House Human Services

For the record, I am Katherine Frazine, right now living in Brattleboro VT and am in the hotel/motel program. I am the mother of a one year old and first experienced homelessness myself at the age of 18.

All I want for my child is for her to have a life that is not this and no matter what I try there seems to be no way out. We just keep hitting road blocks.

I have been in the hotel/motel program for a long time but was given a period of ineligibility in May of 2023, that means that my child, partner and I were not allowed to access emergency shelter in motels for 30 days. This was because we were exited from a hotel. Hotel owners and managers can make up anything and we have no choice and no voice when they do. All that the rule says is that if we are exited “for not following the rules”. That allows Hotel Owners to make up anything. Our families, our children and our lives can be put at risk. People with resources, wealth and power, are given a voice that we are not. If we do a fair hearing, it will not be done before the 30 days is over, so, there really is no mechanism to keep us protected.

During this period last year, I tried to return to my grandmother’s house, my grandmother had raised me, but, kicked me out when I turned 18. I have been experiencing homelessness ever since. I discovered quickly that this was not a situation that was going to work for my family this time either. My grandmother did not want us to stay still. We were once again, left without anywhere to go. At the time that I was allowed again, when I tried to re enter the program I was told that there was no room availability.

I tried over and over again to enter the program. One ESD worker gave me her number to text. So, most of the communication we had was over text. I did not know then, that this made it so that there would be no record of my trying to re-enter the program, I didn’t know how this would impact me later. I thought that this was the practice and my best bet to get in. I began trying in Mid June of 2023, but, was unable to find a room until July 3rd of 2023.

At this time we were told that we were safe to stay in the hotels until June, and so we thought we were. They told us that we just had to renew every 28 days. During this time we got signed up for Coordinated Entry with Homeless Prevention and began applying to connect to other supports. It seemed like there was a chance that we would be able to get our lives together.

Quickly Homeless Prevention told us that our case manager had left and they would need to assign us to a new case manager, but, they were backed up and it would be a while. We have not heard from them again since. We renewed every 28 days as we were supposed to and each time, they told us just to Renew in 28 days.

I eventually was able to find a job and was supposed to start the week of November 9th. However, on November 9th, SUDDENLY, an ESD worker told us that we would not be able to renew, that they had made a mistake, we were not in the cohort and we would have to leave one week later. We learned this on November 9th and then had to leave one week later.

Economic Services did not give us the 28 days that people who are kicked out of the cohort are given. They just said that they made a mistake, our 28 days were used and in exactly one week at the end of our voucher, at the beginning of winter, we would have nowhere to go. I did ask for a fair hearing. The hearing was scheduled AFTER the date that we had to leave. I was expected to live in our car with out one year old while we waited for the hearing. It was at that time that the hotel staff called End Homelessness Vermont on my families behalf. I contacted them and Brenda talked to my reach up case manager and economic services to try to fix it. She worked with other providers to pay for us to have a little more time in the hotel and put in a motion to the Human Services Board to house us until the hearing was complete. The Human Services Board agreed to hear the motion before the case.

However, when we got there, Brenda had to remind them that we were not hearing the entire case that day. We had not been prepared to do so. Then the board said that it was consistent with the departments practice to not house while we waited for the hearing. End Homelessness Vermont worked to make sure we had a voucher on ANY night that there was cold enough weather for night to night cold weather and End Homelessness Vermont and Life Intervention Team will again to buy nights where she could find resources.

However, there was over one week when we were outside. It was cold. In that time, my phone was ruined, I was not able to start my job from living outside, so, I had to let it go, and every time we turned our car off, our daughter said "inside?" . She could not understand that there was no inside to go to.

I want to add that the heat in the car also doesn't work properly and we couldn't find any resources to help us get our car fixed And when reach up decided that they could help us fix our car, we took it to the dealership and got it fixed, then at the last minute, reach up would not pay for the repairs.

When we finally were inside for a few days again because there was several consecutive days of cold enough weather for single night adverse weather, that was when the hearing was. In the hearing, I was expected to know every phone number that I had called ESD from. When people are experiencing homelessness they don't know that. Because we borrowed phones, we asked for help, we used other people's phones. There was no way to prove that we had tried to get in before June 30th. People getting benefits think that every time you interact with ESD they make notes of it, but, ESD does not. Sometimes, they just tell you that there are no rooms and turn you away. If I had known the future, I would have insisted that a note be made.

If you look at the notes in my ESD file, you would see that it said that I was listed as cohort over and over and over again. That didn't matter. It did not matter that I was told that each month. All that mattered was they made a mistake and the correction for the mistake was to throw me, my partner and my baby on the street.

WE, those of us in the program, can't make a single mistake, if we do, we lose our voucher, we get a 30 day period of ineligibility, we lose access to safety. They, Economic Services, can make a large error and somehow it is still us that has to pay for that error. That does not seem right.

The hearing did not get completed on that day, so, it was rescheduled. In that time, I know that Brenda tried to negotiate a resolution with them. It seemed clear that the department was not going to let us back in the cohort and so Brenda Siegel asked for the 28 days that everyone else gets when they are thrown out, she asked if we would drop the appeal if we agreed to that, we said yes though it felt unfair and that we should be let back in the cohort...but..if it is was the only way to keep us safe, then we would. But, the department would not give us that deal either. That 28 days would have gotten us to December 15th and in for the winter, it was less than two weeks longer and they said no. It was their mistake, not mine and they would not do anything.

Then I think that it was elevated by our representative, and suddenly the decision was reversed. Just a day before we would have ended up outside again. We made it to December 15th.

None of this was right. It was all so harmful and I remember asking "doesn't anyone care that we have a 1 year old? Doesn't anyone care about our baby?"

But here is the thing, it isn't just us, there are lots of children not in the cohort that are not protected. There are lots of people with disabilities. Lots of people with medical

issues. It is not just us. There are so many people that were evicted, that were flooded, that had other reasons that they ended up homeless.

Last night we got a letter from hotel owners, telling us that we will have to leave on March 1st. We have heard that lots of people got these letters. No one has told us anything about what is happening, just suddenly we are getting letters from hotel owners, nothing from the state. We don't have anywhere to go. There is no communication. We keep just being shoved from inside to outside with no say and no communication, like we don't matter. I don't understand how that is ok.

I wanted to tell my story today because there are so many of us. We don't need more requirements. More ways to prove ourselves valuable. More punitive measures. More required services. What we need is housing. We need to have options and be given the dignity of working with someone we trust to decide on our best option. WE need to be shown by all of you that you value our safety too. We feel dismissed and ignored. I will never forget what it felt like to be left without support and outside in the cold with my baby.

Please do something to change this for us and please don't think it is ok to leave us outside while we wait. We are human beings and we deserve better than that. This could happen to anybody at any time. It could happen to anyone in this room in fact. Hopefully it doesn't happen, but, it could.

Thank you very much for your time.