



**Testimony before the House Human Service Committee
January 31, 2024
By Sue Minter, Executive Director
Capstone Community Action**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your focus on addressing our housing and homeless challenges with a wider lens of how we can address homelessness and not simply look to shelter people in emergencies.

For the record I am Sue Minter, Executive Director of Capstone Community Action, one of five Community Action Agencies within Vermont who make up the Vermont Community Action Partnership, VCAP. I work closely with Paul Dragon and our colleagues with our shared mission of ending poverty. We are each independent nonprofit organizations and have similar programs, but our portfolio of programs is as multifaceted as is the challenge of poverty.

Capstone does not run shelter per say. We work closely with our shelter providers throughout our service area (Washington, Lamoille and Orange Counties) and do manage six Emergency Selter apartments for families with children in Washington County. Our primary role in this system is to help prevent homelessness and to help people move from homelessness into housing security and economic self-sufficiency. As an anti-poverty organization, we understand that the needs of our low and very low-income people are complex and require a wholistic approach with an array of programs and services. The challenge of homelessness does not end with finding a safe home – there are needs for finding and keeping a job, accessing medical and mental health care, understanding financial management and wellness, along with the basic needs of being a good tenant. Capstone’s housing counselors provide some of these services and other Capstone programs expand that support.

I want to underscore that the Scott administration has done an admirable job trying to triage a challenge that has grown exponentially since 2020. Along with many shelter and service providers across the state, have worked as their partners in this effort, quickly implementing new strategies to spend down the federal pandemic era funds in an efficient and effective manner. Nothing I am saying here should be seen as a denigration of the many dedicated state workers who continue to valiantly manage an unstable system. However, I believe we are truly at an inflection point. And it is appropriate to think differently about how we address what is clearly an unsustainable and deeply emotional challenge for our communities. I will note that I am also not a part of the Governor’s Council on Housing and Homelessness and therefore do

not know the recommendations of this group. I hope that some of what we have to say is included in those recommendations.

With me here today is:

Linda Anderson, Capstone's Director of Family and Community Support Services, and Danielle Robar, of Barre City. Danielle will share with you her experience of facing homelessness, moving through our GA program, and becoming housed. Linda will provide a more detailed view of our housing programs, along with some of the barriers and opportunities for success of these programs.

I will simply introduce their testimony by saying:

- 1) The issue of homelessness is a long-term problem. And this is not just a housing problem. It is also a challenge of providing the best and most appropriate services at the right time for people to become successful and self-sufficient.**

We will never address the challenge and reduce our long term fiscal dilemmas you are struggling through, unless we tackle the issue with a wholistic and strategic approach. This is not a one-year budget fix. It requires systems change. It requires long term thinking with a deeper understanding of why the numbers of unhoused people continues to grow, what the needs of those who are currently unhoused are, and how effectively provide shelter and services to "meet people where they are" to treat people with dignity, help move them forward with their goals.

- 2) Addressing homelessness must be recognized as a state responsibility that can no longer be seen as an exercise in providing a warm roof over people during winter months, as GA was originally designed. The state must manage a more integrated system of sheltering and services to the unhoused.**

We have to understand housing as health care, and recognize that successful programs will envision a continuum of care that understands the needs of the clients and seeks to find both the appropriate setting and services for the client to be successful. Most of these will be short term. Yet some will be long-term needs. Because of the multi-faceted nature of the challenge, responsibility for addressing homelessness cannot be passed down to nonprofit organizations. Our network of nonprofits will continue to be strong and essential partners. But they will never have the authority nor the stability to address this growing and complex challenge – a challenge not only in Vermont but across the country.

- 3) Addressing homelessness takes a wholistic view: The state needs to understand and manage the inter-related work of health, mental health, substance use and housing stability.**

The current system is not coordinated. Indeed, it is disaggregated – both by sector and within regions of the state. While our regions work hard to partner with one another, these partners

ultimately compete against each other for state grants. The Housing Opportunity Program (HOP) is the most critical resource for managing our shelters and services. This critical program must continue to be robustly funded and can be enhanced by incentivizing greater regional coordination among partners. An added challenge is that the different grants for services (HOP, CE, VERAP) provide for specific types of services, rather than supporting an overall ability to meet the client where they are at and provide what might be described as “wrap around” service. And we would also envision a system in which our clients can receive a “HUB” of services in one location, rather than having to migrate from one program and provider to another.

We also need to recognize, support, and incentivize private landlords in this work. They are essential partners with whom we work. Capstone has employed a “landlord liaison” position in Lamoille which has had a significant positive impact for working proactively and productively with landlords who want to help house our clients. The state might consider tax incentives, master leasing, risk pools and other techniques to expand the pool of landlords working with us and our clients.

We are excited to work with your Committee to think differently and strategically. We know Vermont is and can continue to be a leader in this work. We must act now to become more intentional and proactive to not only find appropriate shelter and services for those now in the GA program so that they can move forward toward being housed and self-sufficient. We also need to look to the future for a more integrated and long-term approach.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my comments. And thank you for all the hard work you continue to do on behalf of our communities and our state.