



**Written Legislative Testimony for the House Committee on Human Services
on support of the
Vermont Housing and Conservation Coalitions**

Date: 2/14/24

Introduction

Honorable Chair, Vice Chair and representatives of this committee thank you so much for having me here today. My name is Paul Dragon, and I am the Executive Director of the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity (CVOEO). At CVOEO We operate 10 distinct yet interconnected programs that provide emergency services like shelter, housing, food, and warmth as well as services to help people gain economic independence like Head Start, Microbusiness Development, Personal Finance classes and Weatherization.

Purpose

I am here to discuss the importance of fully funding the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) and invest in a long-term strategy that makes homelessness rare and brief by increasing shelter capacity and permanent housing and support services. Why a long term, multi-year strategy? Because each winter we come to this point when we wonder what we will do with the unhoused and unsheltered and it is this lack of long-term, holistic planning that has left Vermont with the second highest percentage of homelessness in the country.

CVOEO is a Housing First organization. We know that each person has a right to housing and we also know that the best way to solve homelessness is by placing people into permanent housing as directly and as immediately as possible. Unfortunately, due to the record high levels of unsheltered homelessness, we have had to focus on creating and preserving emergency housing capacity to reduce harm, stabilize lives and move people into permanent housing as soon as possible.

At CVOEO, in the last three years, in addition to the ongoing operations of a domestic violence shelter, we have greatly expanded our services to people experiencing homelessness with several new initiatives including a community resource center that sees on average 125 people a day many of whom are unsheltered. We have also added two emergency shelters into our organization. Both the Samaritan House and Champlain Inn emergency shelters came to us because they could no longer be sustained by their former organizations and no other

organization was able to take them in. This is telling because operating emergency shelters is difficult due to the nature of the funding, hiring people to do the work and because of the increasingly complexity of the guests we serve.

Please consider this; at our Community Resource Center, a daytime shelter where we see on average 125 people a day, mostly unsheltered, 28 % of our guests are over the age of 55. Last week our Coordinated Entry Director pulled data for the Burlington area for February 1st of this year and out of the 741 adults in emergency housing including shelters and hotels 595 of them reported a disabling condition. It is critically important for us all to understand that 80 percent of the people in emergency housing (shelters and hotels) have a disabling condition.

This is a health care crisis for people experiencing homelessness. The unhoused and unsheltered are aging, have chronic medical conditions, developmental and intellectual disabilities along with mental health and substance use conditions. This healthcare crisis should inform our strategic planning regarding the need to fund permanent housing over the next 10 years as it informs our short term, emergency approach to shelters here at CVOEO.

We believe that it more humane and more conducive to health, recovery, and quicker access to permanent housing when we create and transition emergency housing from mass, congregate settings to more trauma informed settings in which people have their own room with access to an array of services. As the Program Director of our Samaritan House shelter says, “we used to take people at their most difficult and vulnerable time and then put them in the same room with others at their most difficult and vulnerable time and expect good outcomes.”

Knowing the need and our goal to be more efficient and effective with emergency housing, we approached VHCB with a request for shelter rehabilitation funds. VHCB funds supported the renovation of the Samaritan House’s historic building and turned it from a congregate shelter to a beautiful, single room occupancy, each room with windows, fresh paint refurbished floors, a small kitchen on each floor and common space for guests, all while maintaining the current bed capacity.

We are also in the process of a similar transition with the Champlain Inn Shelter in Burlington, a historic and once venerable hotel. When we took over operations of the Champlain Inn on October 1st, we had long heard the community complaints regarding shelter guests who were required to leave during the day and line back up at night waiting to reenter. The building was also in extreme disrepair inside and out. We have recently received VHCB funding to rehabilitate the shelter that will provide single and double rooms for guests and restore the building to a favorable place within the community. We couldn’t do either renovation without the funding from VHCB or without our partnership with the Champlain Housing Trust as they do the property management for both buildings.

In addition to our emergency housing work, CVOEO focuses on permanent housing with support services. Two years ago, we administered a successful statewide rapid rehousing program for individuals experiencing homelessness and last February we received 200 rapid

rehousing vouchers for families experiencing homelessness. To date we have permanently housed 102 families with children. It has been a slow process, and we could not have housed these families and others without new, permanent, affordable housing coming online. This has been particularly successful in Franklin County where the Champlain Housing Trust has developed new apartments for the unhoused.

Along with the new housing coming online, including we hope, new resident owned, energy efficient mobile homes and mobile home parks, we also need supportive services to care for and keep people successfully housed because of the high percentage of the unhoused with a disabling condition. CVOEO recently received a large five-year philanthropic gift and with it we will develop our Whole Family Program, which is a holistic, integrated services program for unhoused families with children with support services that last up two years after being housed. We hope that the State will also continue and expand its investments in supportive housing for people experiencing homelessness, especially given the high rates of eviction in Vermont that are feeding into the cycle of homelessness.

We cannot solve a complex social challenge with one thing or another or by doing it one year and not the next. This is why we are asking for full funding for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) and to invest in a sustained, long-term strategy that makes homelessness rare and brief by increasing shelter capacity, permanent housing and support services. This commitment is more cost effective and efficient in the long term, and it is this commitment which is the very root of our shared humanity.

Thank you.

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