

Testimony on FY24 Budget H.494: Brenda Siegel

I am a policy advocate and run a hotline through End Homelessness Vermont, which was created as an entity to work on a plan to end homelessness and the housing crisis overall. I have been part of a group of several different organizations and providers to work on a Gateway To End Homelessness that is modeled after Oregon's, Project Turn Key.

We have the 2nd highest rate of homelessness in the country and we right now have a choice to either respond with a mass unsheltering of 1644 households, or thousands of individuals or to build on our successes and create a responsible transition forward. The legislature has done incredible work stabilizing and keeping people sheltered. We have the opportunity to turn that into real success and respond to that astounding distinction of being 2nd in the nation, by digging in and healing this crisis with real, responsible solutions.

Right now 1800 households or 2800 individuals are sheltered in the motel housing program. The house budget will reduce that to ONLY 146 households by July 1st. Again that is going from 1800 households or 2800 individuals, to only 146 households. This means that in places like Rutland where there are 470 people sheltered in motels, almost all of them will have nowhere to go, and will end up converging in Rutlands downtown. In Brattleboro that number is near 300, similar numbers in White River Junction, of course even higher for Burlington and I could go on. Not only is this forced unsheltering a catastrophe for individuals, but it will be a tsunami of disaster for our communities and the diverted costs to public safety, health care, our downtown businesses, but also needed services will far outweigh the continued program costs in the time it takes to make a responsible transition.

I understand that those numbers are hard to hear, but, they are the real numbers. And yes, it will be single moms and people with disabilities and people in recovery and who are struggling with their mental health. Real people will have their lives at risk. When you go from 1800 households or 2800 individuals to 146 households in a population that includes 75% with diagnosed disabilities, and we underfund it. That is the outcome we see. That is the reality, an extremely harsh reality. Also, that budget means only 1200 of the 1800 households would be covered under adverse weather, leaving 600 households out in freezing weather.

To be clear about where these numbers came from, they were in testimony in House Human Services, when they came up with the budget and reiterated as this portion of the budget was relayed in committee.

In the last 3 weeks I have been to 16 motels, and in meetings and workshops with 1000 people and 8 communities. Those communities have included Bennington, Berlin, Montpelier, Barre, Colchester, South Burlington, Brattleboro, Rutland and I will be in the NEK and Windsor County next week. Elected leaders have received over 100 emails from people in the program. I have attached 76 that I have permission to share. These emails were written often by hand or in their emails by these individuals themselves. Please do read them, these lives and voices matter and

rarely does a constituency who is so incredibly disadvantaged, speak up with their own voices to tell you their stories.

Depending on the study that you look at, it costs between 18 million and 54 million dollars more in diverted costs to keep 3000 individuals unsheltered, then the cost of GA. Because these costs are diverted, they don't show up with a price tag in your budget as General Assistance Emergency housing does.

The stories that we hear in the media often highlight the negatives about motels, which I am sure as legislators and sometimes as advocates, makes us feel like we are throwing good money after bad. What we hear less of is all the success stories that have happened as a result of this program. Many of the people that I have met would likely not survive without this program, not all qualify for ssi or ssdi. Some had been chronically homeless due to mental illness or substance use disorder. Many people have finally gotten the medical care that they need and their health is on track. Many, not all, have finally found recovery, because they are stabilized. I have met a large number of people with bipolar disorder, who finally have received treatment and medication and are stabilized because they have safe and consistent shelter. I have also met those who needed surgeries and have finally gotten them, with the community around them to help during recovery. I have heard incredible heartwarming stories and seen with my own eyes the communities that individuals have built and the ways that they support one another. There are also many people in the motels who have not ever lived on the street, this is their first experience with homelessness and because we have been doing the right thing, we caught them.

We have an opportunity right now to build on those successes and provide a true gateway to permanent housing for all these individuals. We have a responsible, clear, plan that has come together with the support of several orgs working on these issues separately. The reason that we have come together now is that we can see the light at the end of this tunnel and we need your support in getting it done. In order for it to work, we need to keep people safe where they are without ending the GA Program, because that will be a critical part of the next step.

We all know that there is a problem, but, the challenge has been, what do we do about it?

In Oregon they had a large number of people on the streets and a natural disaster hit and then COVID. It was a trifecta that increased homelessness and so they came up with a plan that included the acquisition of hotels, keeping them as non congregant shelter with minor, not major renovations and then ultimately transitioning many of them to permanent housing. It was a true gateway out of the crisis.

Here in Vermont we have the opportunity to build our own version, this is not a cut and paste and we are one step closer, because people are already sheltered in the motels. I want to be clear that there are three steps to this process, all three are necessary in order to do this right and not end with thousands of people on the street.

1. Keep people and new people entering homelessness safely in the Motel Program, which means funding that program. The full FY24 costs 72 Million. To Get to BAA is 50 Million.
2. Acquisition of Motels, at first most will remain shelter for the time being.
3. Strategic and well thought out renovations of the hotels to permanent housing. One by one. Bringing on line between 200 and 400 units in the first year, cost depending. It is important to note that some shelter providers may have other options for non congregant permanent housing that this plan will allow flexibility to create.

Steps 2 and 3 would be 40 Million for year one.

We would also ask for 10 Million for supportive services.

I am going to offer some answers to a few looming questions that I know are out there and then leave some time for yours as well.

1. First question folks have asked is are the Hotel Owners ready to sell and how do we make sure we don't end up spending too much money.

I have been in conversation with the hotel owners and most recently have asked for a meeting with all the owners which should be happening soon. For many they don't see THAT hotel returning to becoming a hotel as it was in the past. They are opening to selling, master leasing or renovating to apartments. Most though, see themselves selling and then building or creating a new motel or hotel. There are several benefits to this, including that as that new hotel comes online there will be tax revenue brought in to the states and communities that have been lost over the last few years AND we are creating permanent housing/shelter structures that specifically address a population who we need to put some real focus and support on. It is a win win.

2. Another question that often comes up is how will we address complex needs of people who can be difficult to house.

The implementation process of this plan allows us to address specific needs of individuals to make sure that needs are met. This is something that has not been afforded with a regular shelter program or within this crisis management.

3. Finally a question that I frequently hear is, what if we are inviting people from out of state.

First I want to say, I often help people through this process, it is not that easy to get into this program. You have to wait on hold for 6 hours, sometimes multiple days in a row, except on a rare occasion. You are asked numerous invasive questions and then often you are told there is

not yet a room and to call back. So, you go through this process multiple times. It is not easy enough to be attractive to people from out of state, or in my opinion easy enough to sometimes even be accessible to people in this state. Also, this question has been researched. Of the 2800 individuals using the program only 37 have been found to have come from out of state and those folks all have reasons. I have run into several of them. Here are the examples that I have found. One man came here for work, he did not have a lot of money on his person, but had found a job, he could not find housing and ultimately lost the work. But by this time, he had already moved himself to Vermont, so, I would consider him a Vermonter by then. I met another family who found work, is still working at the job, but could not find housing. So, they came to Vermont to work. I met another family who was fleeing domestic violence in a neighboring state, had money to find housing, she could not. She paid nightly for motels herself until she could not and ended up in the program. And finally, the most distressing, I have run into three gay couples who are intrastate refugees, who came from the south where they were being persecuted for being lgbtqia. They came to Vermont seeing that we were welcoming to the lgbtq and thinking that they could find a home. They could not and again, housed themselves in hotels as long as they could and ultimately ended up in their cars and then in the program. Ultimately, there is no there there in terms of us inviting people from out of state. Each time I have met one of the few people who were not originally in Vermont, there is a legitimate reason beyond shelter that they ended up here.

There are many success stories, and I want to wrap up by informing you of the catastrophic risk we are taking if we end this program, rather keep people safely housed while we make this responsible transition.

In my visits to the hotels and motels, I have met numerous people who use Oxygen to survive, they will not on the street. Countless people who have a sleep apnea machine, meaning that their lives will be at risk. I have met several people with bi polar who finally have it stabilized, some for the first time in their lives, they expressed to me that they will not be able to remain stable without shelter. I have met a lot of folks who have finally found recovery. The data is clear that losing shelter leads to relapse. In a state that has record overdoses and is in the highest percentage rate of overdose deaths, keeping these people stable is critical. There is a man with a skin condition who can't be outside. There are people who don't qualify for ssi or ssdi, but have devices in their body that require them to sleep near an outlet. There are people who just had heart attacks, cancer, or strokes, brain surgery and are still recovering. They don't qualify for ssi or ssdi. There are people who JUST got their children back from DCF custody and they will lose them if they are unsheltered, there are others who are working hard to get them back and there will be a termination of parental rights if they are unsheltered.

We are at a critical juncture where we have in front of us two paths. One that will create worlds of harm to our neighbors, our businesses and community members. Also to our downtowns, to public safety and health care. The other is where people remain safe, and we build on the success of this program, because there has been so much success and take it to the next level where Vermonters, our neighbors and community members, end up in long term housing. This is the first time we have found this clear path. It builds on work that has already been done, it is

the fiscally responsible thing to do as well as the morally responsible one. It is a strategic plan, the framework is there and with VHCB and all of us who have been local and statewide partners throughout the pandemic and beyond at the table, the implementation creates that smooth responsible transition to permanent housing and moves us off of paying for nightly hotel rooms to the extent that we have by around this time next year.

There is so much that you will fund, that is not life or death. The truth is access to shelter or not simply IS life or death. I am asking you to respond to this crisis by ensuring our fellow Vermonters, people who are so often invisible, have a safe place to be. It is fiscally responsible, it is better for our communities, our businesses and for individuals.

I understand that you all have to make extremely difficult decisions every year. I am requesting that you weigh the human cost against all that we hope to accomplish right now. I don't think that loss of stability is worth removing this option.