

Brenda Siegel: Testimony On the H.145: The Budget Adjustment Act 2/14/2023

I am Brenda Siegel, I live in Newfane Vermont. As I am sure that you all know by now, according to recently released data, Vermont currently ranks second in the entire country for rate of homelessness per capita. We are, however, preventing an even greater crisis by keeping our neighbors and community members sheltered. I am recommending that Senate Appropriations keep the \$21 million allocated to extend the full General Assistance (GA) Program. I would like to provide some background and details about my work on the housing crisis. Throughout 2020 and 2021 I engaged in an extensive research project to put together the pieces to end the housing crisis in Vermont. I did this research with experts in the field, lived experience experts and housing partners. We interviewed selectboard members, shelter operators, builders, building companies, motel owners, commissioners and state employees and did a deep dive into zoning regulations and barriers to housing. As part of this work, we connected with national research institutes and experts on housing and the housing crisis. The result of this work is a comprehensive plan to end homelessness in Vermont. We have recommended that a Blueprint be drawn on how to implement this plan and solve the housing crisis by 2030 in our state.

While sleeping on the steps of the state house for 27 nights in fall 2021, we started a hotline for people who were falling through the cracks so that we could help usher them through the complex process of getting into the GA Emergency Housing program. During the 2021-22 winter, we took hundreds of calls. I was the sole person answering the phone for those calls twenty-four hours a day. I want to be clear that whenever we get a family on the phone, we were able every single time to get them into motel-based shelter. We would get people housed and when appropriate, support them consistently to provide a bridge between them and Economic Services, motel-based shelter or other shelter options. Often, the individual would be able to make that connection on their own and sometimes, it was just a bridge between living situations that they needed. It was never impossible to find a motel room; however, we often had to work with the hotels, build a relationship with them, and support the client until DCF found a transition to another GA Motel.

I want to review a few data points about evenings and weekends and 211 based on my work answering the statewide hotline for End Homelessness Vermont. As part of this work, I regularly speak to motel owners about the GA Emergency Housing program. The Department Of Children And Families (DCF) chooses how many motel rooms to reserve for the GA Emergency Housing program for afterhours. Data from DCF on motel shelter capacity for the GA Emergency Housing program, from afterhours, does not reflect availability in the state for the GA Program nor does it reflect availability at any given motel. Also, some motels have expressed their willingness to open up more rooms and take more clients from the GA Emergency Housing program. DCF has not, however, allowed them to accept more GA guests. Also, on the particular weekend in January, which is being used as an example, in which the department says there were over 60 denials, that is not reflective of all the factors behind those denials. Nor is it representative of a trend. We would need to have a much more comprehensive data

analysis, rather than one weekend as an example. But, some of the factors that you may not be aware of, I have listed below.

1. When an individual calls 211, they often have to wait for a call back. That call back can take 2,4,6 or sometimes 8 hours. People experiencing homelessness often don't have access to phones, and when they do have phones, they can't keep their battery charged in the cold. Often by the time the call back comes, rooms have been taken or the individual does not have the transportation to get to that place and most importantly, too often whatever phone the individual was using is no longer available to them. When our volunteers go out, they are asked to sit with them until 211 calls back. Depending on the length of time, that is not always possible.
2. In Afterhour situations, nights and weekends, the department reserves a certain number of rooms. It is not reflective of overall availability of hotels. Often we call those same hotels and ask if there is GA availability and they say, yes, but that the department only reserved X number of rooms for that weekend and those rooms are full. We also regularly check in with GA Hotels and ask what their availability is, several have told us that they are willing to open up more rooms but the department has not wanted them to.
3. Several people are not "eligible" due to what is called a "period of ineligibility" created by rules such as: If you leave a shelter voluntarily, causing your own homelessness, if you refuse a congregant shelter, if there is a room and you don't get there, if you are removed from a shelter and so on and this often accounts for many denials. I want to note here that several of the reasons one receives a period of ineligibility are not trauma informed or informed by the practical realities of these folks. People with mental illness will often struggle in a congregant shelter setting and thus be removed, triggering a period of ineligibility. People with a history of being abused, recent or past, feel incredibly fearful in congregant shelter settings. People with substance use disorder, have a disease and there is no adequate shelter setting for them, usually they have co-occurring illnesses. People don't have transportation to shelters, so, refusal of shelter can be as simple as that they could not get there. One has caused their own homelessness if they are evicted for non payment of rent or other no cause reasons. So, many denials often can be accounted for in this way.

I also want to speak a little to the extreme cold weather of a few weekends ago.

1. That weekend, the department opened up eligibility for people who were being denied based on archaic rules that require a period of ineligibility for reasons like, refusing a shelter, (which often has very complicated and sound reasons for the individual) so a lot of people who did not have access to shelter, suddenly were calling 211. Just the day before that weekend, I expressed my concern that by suddenly lifting the rule, there would be an influx, when this could have been handled in a strategic manner. I see the question before you as the same issue. We need the opportunity to offer a strategic plan from housing partners and others in the field as well as the administration to prevent the looming crisis of unhousing people.

2. There were two emergency cold shelters that weekend, one in Rutland and one in Burlington and those supposedly had transportation from the department, though it was unclear if there was transportation back to their home part of the state. 211 was told to then prioritize families, so some of the denials reflect that mandate.
3. People who never call, called, because otherwise they were going to freeze to death. People who have found makeshift shelter or other means to stay safe. People who are already in tents.

We were able to find a solution.

I hope this shows that this was not reflective of a regular weekend and while it is being used as a reason to cut funding, it does not make sense. In my view, most situations that were created on the weekend can be avoided with better planning ahead. The reason that I give the example of the extreme cold is that we knew the extreme cold was coming 10 days in advance at least. We could have begun to transition people to these emergency shelters early on, but even then we found a path.

As it stood, within the means available at that time, the department did a good job of managing that cold weekend and worked well with all of us as partners in that work. I would hope that going forward, that model of really working together could be a model. We all know that this is extremely complicated and that is why we need this time to create a transition plan. The circular problem doesn't go away by cutting funding, it will just get bigger.

I do want to take one moment and address cold weather rules, the regular cold weather rules are extremely inhumane and each year that we have only those in place people freeze to death. It is not a stop gap solution if funding is cut and in fact only prevents better planning for the need of the community.

Housing partners, including myself, have asked to extend the full GA Emergency Housing program until June, which we would not do if it was harmful to our clients, and, in a good faith effort, many partners have presented a draft of their plan for emergency housing. I have had the opportunity to take a look at this plan and do support it. These are the people on the ground working directly with the clients day to day. Economic Service Workers do the challenging work of point of entry, but, day to day work with each individual is done by housing partners. When people are exited from shelter, a crisis is created that diverts housing partners from the oxygen that they need to continue to work on a transitional plan. Instead, they must put the energy toward the people that will be exited to the streets because that becomes the crisis point. Housing partners in the past have not been asked for a plan, the administration has. Without fail, the administration's plan has included exiting some people to the street. The GA Working Group has time and time again been uncomfortable with this idea.

I do want us to recall that last June there was a plan after we asked for this extension. It was the only time that we were talking about a smooth transition without exiting people. Many in the GA working group, including myself, supported the plan because we were assured that people would have 18 months in transitional housing through motels. Unfortunately, there was not an

accurate accounting of the funds available by the department. As we all recall, in August the department, without notice to the GA Working Group, legislators or individuals, began to “pare down the program.” With some hard work, \$20,000,000 more were found and that is what leads us here.

I joined the GA Working Group in the fall of 2021, but have worked with people on the working group throughout 2020 on work and after its creation. In my experience there needs to be some more agency put with housing partners to be able to be active participants in the decision making process, rather than a sounding board for the department. That often leaves us in the dark until it is too late for us to work together to make a sound plan.

In 2021, when people were exited from the GA program, many people’s lives completely fell apart. People are put at risk of relapse and overdose. Parents with DCF involvement and children in custody, lose access to a place to visit their children. Often, parents ultimately have their parental rights terminated after losing shelter. Many experience sexual violence and/or trafficking, have their limited belongings stolen and/or ruined, and turn to drugs for the first time. If people are exited, we must be honest with ourselves about the fall out that will occur to human beings in our state and our communities.

Abruptly displacing people experiencing homelessness from shelters has consequences for communities. It diverts costs to public safety, corrections, health care and service providers. Our communities suffer and we overall spend more money. We have a temporary solution to keep people experiencing homelessness safely sheltered right now, and we all recognize that we need a transition. I am asking you to give us a chance to offer a transition. Please do not return us to crisis mode as people are exited from motels without another option.

I want to take a moment to talk about the word “able bodied” when we talk about people experiencing homelessness. There is a growing body of evidence that shows that even brief episodes of houselessness, such as 3 weeks of a month, have lasting consequences on physical and mental health. An example that I can give is that Josh Lisenby, who I shared the portico with, was chronically homeless for six years and would be in the “able bodied” category that you are creating. It is a bit of a misnomer. Josh developed severe challenges with this mental health almost immediately when he had the traumatic experience of becoming homeless, which he has spoken out publicly about and a back injury that means he can never go back to cooking, which was his career before and he loved. The result of his houselessness is that he can not stand for long periods of time and he suffers immensely. That is what the reality of “able bodied” is in this category.

I also want to share a part of my own story that I have not talked publicly about. I slept for just 27 nights on that portico. I had a home to go back to and health insurance. I have sustained injury to my body that over a year later, I am still not healed from. In my time on those steps, my physical health declined to the point that on that 27th night, Josh and I talked about the reality of my health. We both agreed that if this went on much longer I was going to end up leaving in an ambulance. He was extremely worried about me, as he should have been, because I was

declining at a rapid speed. This is not hyperbole, this was the reality, after just 27 nights. Anyone who visited us on those steps could attest to that decline. Again, I had a home to go back to and health insurance. People were caring for us. They were bringing us food. I was nowhere near the most extreme of the circumstances that we are asking so called “able bodied” people to go into. I didn’t walk off those steps because I knew that if I did there were thousands of people who would not have shelter. I was willing to put myself through this, not forced. However, I do now have a window into what exactly it is that we are doing when we exit people from these motels, forcing them back to the street.

I ask that the committee uphold the full \$21 million in the BAA that was presented from the House and that is needed to keep from a crisis situation in sudden loss of shelter. While there was much deliberation in the House, House Human Services Member Representative McGill spoke in favor of full funding on the floor and an amendment to cut that funding was voted down with a resounding voice vote, including all HHS members. This is the right thing to do for our communities and for individuals and I take seriously the window being given, should you include full funding, to present a transition plan to the legislature. I would additionally ask that housing partners, others in the field, and the administration all be invited to present plans to the legislature, so that there is an adequate transition plan by June that does not exit people to the street. A good transition does not include putting people on the street, it includes finding an alternative shelter and a bridge to permanent housing.

I would be happy to present any data or research if needed to help support some of these positions if available.

Thank you for your time and your continuous hard work on behalf of Vermonters.