



**House General & Housing, and Senate Economic Development, Housing & General Affairs Committees
Public Hearing Testimony 16 February 2023
Robert Little, Director of Community Development**

Good evening:

My name is Robert Little, and I serve as the Director of Community Development at RuralEdge, the nonprofit affordable housing developer in the Northeast Kingdom. I also serve as Vice-Chair of the Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition.

RuralEdge sees daily the effects that homelessness has had in the Northeast Kingdom. We receive calls every day from those experiencing homelessness, or those whose housing situation is uncertain at best. They state that they need to get into our housing in a matter of weeks before their apartment building will be sold, their rent will be increased to the point where they cannot pay, or the motel they have been relying on for transitional housing may not be available. Since all our units have waitlists, more often than not, we are not able to respond to those in crisis before they become unhoused.

RuralEdge supports the bipartisan sponsored H.132, establishing a homeless bill of rights and prohibiting discrimination against person without permanent homes. This bill acknowledges that those without homes are still members of the community and must be treated as such. However, this begs the question that, if our zoning makes it difficult for emergency shelters to be established, are we truly considering the unhoused population valued members of the community?

Emergency shelters are necessary as not every household is going to qualify for permanent housing or within the timeframe they need. With no emergency shelters and no designated homelessness service agency in the Northeast Kingdom, we are already fighting an uphill battle to create these necessary shelters. In the latest version of the housing bill proposed by Senator Ram Hinsdale, we are glad to see that emergency shelters cannot be restricted to hours or seasons of operations. However, this bill will have a limited effect in the Northeast Kingdom as shelters can still be restricted by location. Newport's latest zoning by-laws state that a shelter is viewed as a multi-family dwelling and is subject to conditional use anywhere. The town of Lyndon makes no explicit reference to emergency shelters in their by-laws, and St. Johnsbury restricts temporary overnight shelters to the health services district, 2.6 miles away from downtown with no continuous sidewalk access and is still a conditional use. Any organization looking to develop an emergency shelter in any larger Northeast Kingdom municipality will have to use their limited expertise to make their case to a municipality and abide by any conditions placed on the development of the shelter, if it is even granted.

In addition to the zoning reforms listed in the bill, which we support, we suggest that at least one smaller congregate shelter of around 10 beds be allowed by right in mixed-use districts, while larger congregate shelters could remain regulated under conditional use. We also suggest broadening the definition of emergency shelter to include those experiencing a mental health crisis, those fleeing domestic violence, or other short-term emergency situations in addition to those experiencing homelessness.

In the rural Northeast Kingdom, placing smaller shelters in mixed use districts which are closer to amenities and essential services, which keeps those experiencing homelessness connected to the community, not out of sight and out of mind. At the same time, this also ensures that access to emergency shelter is not contained to one large municipality, and smaller shelters would not have an adverse effect on the character of these mixed-use areas. In our region, this change would allow for the expedient creation of emergency shelters to make sure that what is lacking in the Kingdom currently is not the case next winter, especially with questions around the sustainability of housing people in motels. Anything you can do to expand the availability of emergency shelters will have a benefit, not just to shelter providers, but to housing providers who cannot meet the demand for housing. Thank you for your consideration of this request.