



**Senate Economic Development, Housing, & General Affairs
Homelessness Awareness Day (HAD) Testimony 19 January 2023
Robert Little, Director of Community Development**

Good morning:

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.

First, I want to thank you and your colleagues for the unprecedented, transformational investment you have made in affordable housing. Since CARES Act and ARPA funds have been allocated, RuralEdge has brought 74 new units on-line, and another 132 under construction or have funding secured. Overall, we have 14 projects in our pipeline for the next four years. We are proud of our accomplishments these past several years, and I am here today to tell you that we are not done yet.

In my role at RuralEdge, I oversee communications and resident services, including our Community Building and Engagement and our SASH (Support and Services at Home) programs. I know these days at the beginning of the legislative season are full of individuals and organizations advocating for the needs of Vermonters with diverse issues and struggles, so I want to begin this testimony with some successes that RuralEdge has experienced this past year thanks to your efforts.

In the spring of 2021, utilizing \$2.3 Million in VHCB Homelessness Relief Funds, we were able to adapt the former Caledonia County Jail into nine units of housing in downtown St. Johnsbury, a property we now call The Cherry Street Hotel. All the residents came from the local Coordinated Entry list. While we shared the concerns that concentrating nine households totaling 14 people previously experiencing homelessness could create issues, this was not our first project with this tenant selection process. In 2020, we housed seven households with 27 people using the same funding with great success. It was this experience, and the stories we continue to hear from our residents, that give us pride in what we do.

For example, Angel, a young single parent, had lost her job, survived a complicated pregnancy, and was staying with her newborn in a cramped mobile home in Derby, in mid-winter, with relatives with whom she did feel her daughter was safe. When tensions boiled over, Angel took her little girl and left. They stayed at the Fairbanks Inn in St. Johnsbury, one of two places the unsheltered population in the Northeast Kingdom could stay. In May of 2022, she signed a lease on a new apartment at Cherry Street, bringing her from precarious housing to safe, permanent housing for herself and her daughter. In discussing her housing situation, Angel said "I'm afraid to be happy at times, because I've had so much happen," she said. "But I feel comforted in that we have a stable place to live." Angel's story tells us so much. We house a population that has undergone tremendous trauma that we would not wish upon anyone, so we see it as our opportunity and responsibility to make sure that our residents not only get into housing, but thrive in it.

To accomplish this, we have utilized our partnership with Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA) to have a dedicated staff member, based out of the office at our Cherry Street property, to provide housing retention services to the residents at the property, and across St. Johnsbury with both private landlords and RuralEdge. Her work includes regular check-ins, service coordination with landlords and service providers, as well as ongoing education on how to be a good tenant.

This position complements RuralEdge's Resident Support Specialist, who operates an Eviction Prevention Program within our portfolio. The program is funded out of State Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) funds. Our staff member receives referrals from our property managers when lease violations or notices to quit are issued, follows up with those residents within one week, and works with them on a housing retention plan that includes everything from a payment plan for back rent to service coordination to assist with behavioral issues. After 60 days, if the issue has not escalated and is being resolved, we celebrate it as an eviction prevented. In just six short months, we have seen no evictions from those who are working with this staff member.

While these successes give us great hope, there is no shortage of challenges that housing providers face when housing those previously experiencing homelessness. The funding for wraparound services needed for so many are still not adequate to serve the needs that we address as housing providers. When individuals disengage from their service providers, or the period of wraparound services in the program that got them housed have concluded, it ultimately falls on the housing providers to address the issues these residents face when they are in crisis. While we have set up an Eviction Prevention program to intervene in these situations, the fact is that we are not able to address all the diverse needs that come with housing individuals previously experiencing homelessness. We can coordinate services and work with service providers, but if the resident is unwilling to engage with these services, ultimately some cases will lead to eviction.

While we acknowledge the reality of the challenges we face, we still gave great hope for the upcoming year. Thanks to a federal appropriation from Senator Sanders, there is a Mental Health Pilot program coming to SASH. This will allow RuralEdge to hire two mental health clinicians for one year, likely with support from Northeast Kingdom Human Services (NKHS), to address the mental health issues that our residents face, which have only increased since the onset of the Pandemic. We will have dedicated staffers to intervene in times of crisis, as well as preventive interventions to address issues before they become a crisis. As a housing provider, we see funding for supportive services, both within and outside of the housing organizations, as of equal importance as funding for housing itself.

This does not mean that funding for housing units does not remain of great importance. Our number of new units, and those in the pipeline, is impressive, but we need funding for VHCB, both in remaining ARPA and in general funds, to keep up with the pace of development and rehabilitation of the older properties in our portfolio. Further, investing funds to bring more shelter capacity for the unsheltered is of great importance in the Northeast Kingdom, where there is currently no shelter.

With an additional \$175 million allocated to state agencies such as the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, Department of Housing and Community Development, and Vermont Housing Finance Agency, community partners will be able to develop critically needed apartments across the State, invest in Vermont's existing housing stock, especially in rural communities like the Northeast Kingdom, provide opportunities for homeownership, stabilize manufactured home parks, repurpose buildings that are underutilized, like the Cherry Street Hotel, enhance smart growth and climate friendly building practices and locations, and provide housing and enhance shelter capacity for the most vulnerable Vermonters.

We can look at our housing situation as both a crisis and an opportunity. Any efforts you make in the development of housing and the accompanying services has a direct impact on the effectiveness that RuralEdge, and the other affordable housing providers in the state, can have on the communities we serve as we all seek to address this crisis. We are not done yet, and every decision you make to increase access to housing tells Vermonters that you, too, are not done yet!

Thank you for your time and your efforts to address the many needs presented to you today.