

Testimony

10/5/2023

Montpelier 12:30pm

Re: H. 171 - An act relating to adult protective services and emergency housing transition

Good Afternoon,

Thank you for inviting me to testify here today. My name is Chloe Collins, I am the Executive Director for Bennington County Coalition for the Homeless, I have been running homeless shelters in Vermont since the start of the Pandemic. I attended Vermont Law School where I received a Juris Doctor and a Masters Degree. I have worked in free legal clinics in Vermont and helping homeless war Veterans in Louisiana. I have a background in restorative practice and trauma informed care.

BCCH is a twenty five year old non-profit that runs the only homeless shelters in the county which include a sixteen-bed congregate adult shelter and a nine unit family shelter. We also offer drop-in services for those who need a hot meal or a shower, and outreach services to those in motels and encampments. BCCH serves around two hundred fifty adults and children a year with emergency housing and case management services.

Because all of us in this room care deeply about the homeless population in our state. I'd like to share some experienced-based insights about the current need on both the macro and micro level. First, the big-picture view...

Vermont ranks second for homelessness in the country. The expansion of motel vouchers was never intended to be a permanent solution to Vermont's unhoused populations. It is a band-aid on an emergency-room sized problem that has been begging for a long-term solution. For the past three years those of us on the front-lines have been looking to the legislature to invest in a permanent solution. Homelessness is a social wound that needs more than a band-aid, but we have not seen investments made in a permanent solution. For the people we serve that means that their struggle for the most basic elements and a roof over one's head, becomes a game of chutes and ladders. As they strive to make progress, housing insecurity is always looming in their near future, sapping their hope. It is imperative that the legislature invest in permanent long-term solutions for our most vulnerable Vermonters.

In Bennington County this crisis is at the forefront. We have less resources and funding than Chittenden and other parts of Vermont. Bennington does not have a warming or

cooling shelter or a 24/7 public restroom available. This is further compounded by limited public transportation, a lack of local health care providers, and barriers and costs associated with new development.

This summer as the first wave of the motel homeless were evicted from the motel voucher program, Bennington saw a noticeable increase in public sanitation concerns, police calls, and reported violent incidents. People's Park, a local green space, had to be shut down and emptied by the Bennington Police Department. We turn away multiple families a week at our family shelter, and our waitlist is a couple of binders thick. As a state we are criminalizing poverty and homelessness, making the problem worse.

Now for the micro view about what it's like for those of us on the ground. And by the way, anyone on the forefront will tell you that it is a 24/7 job in which everyone is doing the work of two or three people.

We operate on extremely tight budgets. When opportunities for funding come in, they are often tied to short turn around times, complex processes, and significant financial and human capital demands. As a small Vermont nonprofit, it's like being asked to write a dissertation in a week while you are dealing with the demands of providing basic services in an under-resourced facility that's exceeding capacity, supervising an overworked staff, and managing the inevitable crises. The process undercuts our confidence in the state's mission to promote service equality within Vermont.

So what happens? Rather than funding going to the experts doing this work on the ground, we have a top down model that perpetuates systems that are disconnected from the populations and services needed. Here's an example: the Agency of Human Services is being forced to use temp agencies to fill in the ground positions in the community. These temporary employees are not familiar with the inventory of resources, are unable to build the necessary rapport with folks as short term workers, and frequently can't meet the need. For example our street outreach team desperately needs a wound care nurse for open body wounds from Xylazine drug contamination. However, we have been unable to get this critical resource throughout the years we have been doing outreach.

Small nonprofits on the ground are bleeding out and not getting what we need such as automated external defibrillator, basic wound care, and self-protection classes. Tragically, staff and clients are dying because basic resources aren't being provided to these efforts. I personally have experienced five losses in the past year alone.

BCCH's family shelter, that we have been operating for over twenty years, was shut down this year due to extensive repairs we could not afford to do. BCCH then partnered with Hale Resources, LLC who purchased the property in an attempt to save the shelter. We pursued the Vermont Housing Improvement Program and Vermont Housing and Conservation Board lead paint program. Unfortunately, despite identifying a path forward with these programs, we could still not save the shelter due to the local Housing Opportunities Commission being out of VHIP funding. The only option to move forward is for private investment to bring this property back online. That in turn creates new barriers because some high-risk individuals BCCH is looking to serve, would not pass the screening process.

The push for everyone to apply to traditional funding sources ties the hands of innovation. New solutions can take years, with heavy upfront commitments of both time and funding. Additionally, these funds are restricted to perpetually low-income housing which is unattainable for for-profit organizations. Or they impose income and household size restrictions that don't meet the needs of this population because they're based on outdated HUD numbers. I'm not exaggerating when I say that we are facing the current housing crisis because the current system creates unnecessary challenges that make it impossible for non-profits and developers to partner in creative ways and address the need.

I have shared some of the barriers we face to help you appreciate the hope we feel when a real opportunity to make a permanent impact on the homeless crisis comes along.

Which brings us to right now, and H. 171. Bennington is painfully aware that another 137 households are going to be exited from the motels in April. That number includes folks with mental and physical disabilities, and 97 children.

Hale Resources and BCCH have a proposal for meeting much of this pressing emergency need. We have a model for purchasing the local Autumn Inn and turning it into emergency voucher housing. So far we have been unable to get the grant funding needed to make this model come to fruition in the time frame that it is required.

What makes this solution better? It is clear to social service providers that the motel voucher program was not successful because individuals were isolated from resources and support, often unable to even get food or toilet paper. Therefore our model includes:

- Onsite GBCS nurse 5-15 hours a week
- Onsite Turning Point recovery coach 20 hours a week
- Onsite full time case management services - through UCS and BCCH
- Onsite Job counseling, vouchers, and skill development from Goodwill of Berkshire
- On site Aids Project of southern Vermont Syringe services and programming 10 hours a week
- Transportation free of charge offered onsite by Green Mountain Transit Express

All of these resources are already available and would be deployed to one central location, freeing bandwidth for the nonprofits currently providing those services. Instead of having social workers and syringe services drive to 15 locations, they would now provide centralized services at set hours.

This model would house 32-40 individuals at a time with full time staffing on site. 10 of the units could be used for Pathways clients as they have had difficulty locating units for vouchers.

Our ask to make this possible is either that the state provides a low interest loan or we received unrestricted grant funding of \$1.25 million.

We also have a phase two for the model to allow GBCS health hub to be placed on site for much needed community resources such as public showers, restrooms, case management, and a cooling and warming site. These are needs that our community has been trying to fill for over twenty-five years, and been unable to provide via traditional routes.

BCCH and the homeless community of Bennington have the support of a coalition of local organizations and have received letters of support for our request for expanding funding and shelter capacity from: United Counseling Services, Sunrise, Pave, Turning Point, Town Leadership, Savida, Interfaith Council, Aids Project of Southern Vermont, Community Police Advisory Review Board, Greater Bennington Community Services, and Hale Resources LLC.

The town is also stepping up in unheard of ways to support the population by committing \$50,000 from a revolving loan fund toward those exiting motels in April. With all local

agencies and the town on Board, the only barriers to creating innovative permanent solutions for housing this population are at the state and federal level.

Best of all, this is a step toward a permanent solution, not a band-aid. If you need more proof I invite you to look at the Housing First Model. Studies showed that between 75 percent and 91 percent of households remain housed a year after being rapidly re-housed.

Secondly, this is an investment that will save money in the long run. Vermont has sunk 200 million in the motel voucher program. Can't we invest a fraction of that in permanent long term solutions? Can't we incentivize developers and non-profits to partner together to solve the housing crisis? I wouldn't be here today if I didn't believe that all of us in this room wouldn't rather see better and more lasting solutions to homelessness in Vermont.

At the end of the day it's about vulnerable Vermonters who are looking to you for your help and support. We can't let anyone else die when we have workable solutions at hand. If we held a minute of silence for every child who lost housing in Bennington in April we would be sitting here silently for over an hour and a half.

Thank you for your time and for inviting me to speak on these important issues. Together, let's do what it takes to make sure that Vermont is an inclusive and welcoming state for everyone.