



Christina Brown
Chief Program Officer
Spectrum Youth & Family Services
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Testimony – Youth Homelessness Awareness Day, Education

Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today, and the time that you are all giving in recognition of the experiences of youth homelessness in our state.

My name is Christina Brown; I am the Chief Program Officer at Spectrum Youth and Family Services.

At Spectrum, we serve over 1300 youth each year, between the ages of 12 and 30 years old with services that focus on Prevention and Intervention, Life Skills, and Basic Needs. We provide crisis stabilization, employment and education coaching, outpatient mental health and substance use counseling, mentoring, affinity spaces, food and material resources, and supportive housing services including up to 30 beds for youth experiencing homelessness in Chittenden County and an additional 10 in Franklin County.

We provide services through the lens of positive youth development with an emphasis on trauma-informed care – recognizing the unique strengths, challenges, social-emotional and cognitive milestones of teens and young adults and catering our programming to match these needs. At Spectrum, we recognize the compounding impact of trauma on the developing minds of the children and youth we serve, and we pride ourselves in providing responsive supportive programming that meets the youth where they are at, keeping their dignity, autonomy, and voices at the center of our work.

A vitally important resource that we at Spectrum are proud to support is the Homelessness Prevention program in the Champlain Valley School District. This unique and impactful program first piloted in early 2022 with the creation of a Housing Support Services Coordinator position embedded in the schools. The HSSC, Jennie, provides housing navigation services to families with children who are living in emergency shelters, places not meant for habitation – like a car or a tent – or imminently at risk of losing their housing and entering homelessness. She connects with these children and families in a place, and through the people they trust – their school, the faculty and staff who see them every day.

We often get asked why the Champlain Valley School District would be prioritized for such a pilot, being that this is not a district that many think of when they think of visible homelessness. But homelessness for children and youth is often invisible.

Since launching in 2022, the Housing Support Services Coordinator has moved 73 families out of literal homelessness into stable housing – this includes over 200 children, *our Vermont students*, from Pre-K through 12th grade, in the Champlain Valley School District alone. An additional 38 families were able to stabilize in their homes, preventing homelessness all together. The HSSC has worked with 22 young adults, age 18 or over, homeless, alone, and trying to finish school while solving their own housing crisis.

In this school year alone, 63 families have been referred to the program, totaling nearly 150 students. These are children who are unable to meaningfully engage in their education because they are already, or at imminent risk, of experiencing the deep and lasting trauma of homelessness.

The HSSC in the Champlain Valley School District has been able to offer consultation and support to administrators and McKinney-Vento liaisons in other districts where the need for these services is high and rising. These liaisons, while incredibly important advocates in our schools, are overburdened to take on housing navigation and retention. The specialized and distinct role of Housing Support Services Coordinator in CVSD, who is also the district's McKinney-Vento liaison, brings the expertise and skillset of the housing world into the field of education – meeting young people where they are at, eliminating the barriers to accessing care, building on the trusting relationships families have with their schools, and keeping kids in the classroom where they want to be.

I work every day in the Spectrum Basic Needs Programs, where we see youth mostly 18 and over coming into our shelter, often spending years, trying to find stability. For many of them, their first experience of homelessness was in their childhood, with their family, and I see first-hand the impacts of these early experiences. Data from the National Network for Youth has shown us that half of all adults who are homeless had their first experience of homelessness before the age of 25.

We must bring services to the children in the place where they are most connected, and explore solutions that make the experience of a child experiencing homelessness rare, brief, and nonrecurring. The Housing Support Services Coordinator program in the Champlain Valley School District is one such solution that has proven time and again to have a life-changing impact on the stability of these families. For a child, we cannot separate their housing from their education.

An investment in ending child and youth homelessness is a long-term investment in a data driven solution to curb the rise of homelessness across all age demographics. Today, we have taken the important step of drawing awareness to this issue. Awareness is the *first* step. Many service providers are leaps and bounds ahead of mere awareness, we are in our communities, in our schools, with these children every day implementing solutions we know work to end and prevent homelessness, and we need others to join us.

Thank you for taking the time to hear this testimony, and to bring greater visibility to a population that has too often gone unseen.