



CENTRAL VERMONT REFUGEE ACTION NETWORK

Testimony Re: housing bill H.169

From the co-sponsoring organization Central Vermont Refugee Action Network

Dear Committee,

Our beloved Vermont is not welcoming to all persons. Some workers are caught in a 21st century version of sweatshops and flop houses, with employers also acting as landlords. When the work is long and hard or even dangerous, the workers cannot move to better alternate employment unless they also can find new living situations, a very difficult step when potential new landlords require them to show social security numbers. Thus, many times the families remain trapped in a difficult situation. This is true of undocumented workers; it is also true for those who are applying for asylum. These asylum seekers may not receive social security numbers for 6 months to a couple of years even though their application is legally filed.

The Central Vermont Refugee Action Network works with refugees and asylum seekers. We have direct experience of asylum seekers caught in this very negative employer/landlord feedback loop. A house can look ordinary from the outside, but the living room can have six people sleeping in it, and every bedroom full. When a special educator was found to help with a preschooler in his home, there was no place to let her come in to work with the family. When the water was permanently non-potable in another place, there was no way to complain without the family losing their housing. When one family tried to start a garden, they were denied the ability to water the plants. Yet the landlords made more and more money as they stuffed more people into each house and charged rent for each person.

When people trapped in such a situation start looking for different housing, they cannot find it without help. When new arrivals come in, ones who are not in this poor work situation, they cannot find a rental without help either. Most landlords will not rent to someone who does not have a social security number, so time and again persons in our organization have had to personally co-sign for rental units so a landlord would accept our asylum seeker tenants. What happens to those who don't have our organization behind them?

We currently have a two-tiered system. There is not a level playing field for those who desperately need a fair chance at rental housing. There are other ways to do credit checks rather than through social security numbers. In fact, social security numbers were never supposed to be used for anything other than social security. Vermont needs immigrants; even our governor says so. How can we keep them here, and treat them fairly? Support H169.

Sincerely,

Rachel Walker Cogbill, President
Central Vermont Refugee Action Network