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## **Joint Hearing of the House Human Services and the House General and Housing Committees on 2.11.26 - Act 69 Report on The Road Home**

My name is Max Barrows. I am autistic and I receive Developmental Services. I have been the Outreach Director for Green Mountain Self-Advocates for 18 years. GMSA is a disability rights organization led by people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. My comments today are about how ableism impacts housing.

People with intellectual disabilities are often looked down on more than we are looked up to. Society sends a strong message that we are not capable — that we are too slow. This mindset is widespread, and it casts a shadow over our desires to work, go to college, get married, have children, and live on our own or with friends.

Ableism is not just about how one person treats another. It affects decisions that shape our lives. Those decisions can turn into laws, policies, and programs that separate us from others — such as institutions or segregated programs. Ableism is built into systems, and it limits our opportunities.

One major impact is poverty. Working-age Vermonters with disabilities experience poverty at more than twice the rate of Vermonters without disabilities. Limited access to education, employment discrimination, and low expectations all contribute to financial instability. When you combine poverty with a statewide housing crisis, the result is that many people with disabilities have very few housing options.

Housing discrimination is also real. A 2024 study found that 30% of respondents reported experiencing housing discrimination. The most

common reasons were disability and receiving public assistance, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition.

Many of us also live at the intersection of multiple identities. We may be people of color or LGBTQ. When discrimination happens, it is not always clear which part of our identity is the reason. For me personally, when I face discrimination, I sometimes do not know whether it is because I am Black or because I am autistic.

We need real housing options — options that allow us to live like people who do not have disabilities. Right now, there are not enough meaningful options. Too often, low expectations shape decisions about where we live. Some families worry that their disabled sons or daughters will not be safe living independently. Even those of us who work full-time are sometimes not seen as capable of living on our own.

We are encouraged by the proposal to create state-funded housing vouchers for people with disabilities. However, we believe these vouchers should support independence. Under federal HUD guidelines, vouchers generally cannot be used to live with family. In Vermont, exceptions are sometimes made just for people with disabilities. While this may seem helpful in the short term, it can create long-term barriers. Families may come to rely on that income, which can make it harder for a person with a disability to move out and establish their own household. Housing policy should support independence, not unintentionally reinforce dependence.

Housing policy should promote integration. Self-advocates want to live in regular neighborhoods, alongside people without disabilities. We do not want separate facilities or disability-only housing. We want to be part of the community — part of the mix.

I urge you to keep these realities in mind as you move forward. People with disabilities deserve equal opportunity in housing, just like any other Vermonter. Thank you for listening and for your work to make housing more inclusive.