

Vermont Housing Conservation Coalition testimony

Good morning and thank you for having me.

My name is Hannah Pickett and I live in Williston at Zephyr Place , where I am a Champlain Housing Trust resident. I am not homeless because of the work that CHT did with the support of the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board.

I want to tell you my story of hardship, resiliency and hope.

I grew up in the beautiful state of Vermont. I am 37 years old and a graduate of the Community College of Vermont with a degree in medical assisting. I loved working in healthcare -helping providers, connecting with patients, and making a difference.

But in 2018, I was rear ended in a car accident. My glasses flew off my face, everything in my car went flying and the glove box opened from the impact. My car wasn't too badly damaged, so I assumed I was fine. I was NOT fine.

I had lost basic skills like reading comprehension, math, executive functioning, telling time and suffered from daily migraines, exhaustion and confusion. It has taken me until recently to recover.

I lost my job, had limited income and eventually received an eviction notice right before the pandemic. I was so sick and stressed from financial instability, I lost all of my hair.

Upon eviction, I had nowhere to go. I lost most of my belongings, including my 15-year-old support cat. I was completely on my own with a damaged brain.

I was overwhelmed, scared and confused about what to do. It was exhausting being exposed to the weather. I was having constant PTSD attacks. Losing time, blacking out not knowing where I was or what I was doing when they ended. I was very vulnerable, frail and weak. I was falling asleep in public. As a single woman, this was very dangerous. I had difficulty finding shelter. We don't have enough shelters, and we definitely don't have enough housing. After some time, I was hospitalized. It took me a month and a half before I had enough strength to leave the hospital.

A nurse case manager helped me apply for disability and the emergency hotel program during the pandemic which helped me survive.

Without a stable address I wouldn't have been able to apply for social security benefits or secure housing. I finally located my emotional support animal Minu. He was with animal control and was being processed to be sent to a shelter. Conditions at the motel were rough, but I had a roof over my head and was grateful.

My nurse care manager helped connect me with CHT, leading me to secure housing once my Section 8 voucher was approved. There is typically a 5-year waiting list for Section 8.

There is a lack of affordable housing for the low income and disabled in Vermont. My social security benefits would not cover one month's rent for a one-bedroom apartment at market rate.

I moved into a CHT apartment just in time and finally had a safe space to rebuild my life. My apartment is beautiful, spacious and full of light with large windows.

Minu loves to watch the birds. I love to bake and share goodies with my neighbors. There is a view of Camel's Hump from the kitchen where I have coffee every morning. When I walked in, I knew we were finally home.

Most people are unhoused for reasons like losing your good health such as myself, leaving an abusive relationship, trauma, a death, or falling behind on rent or a mortgage.

Because of my housing, I am safe, healthy and happy. I have not had a PTSD related event in two years. As you can see... I now have hair. This is what stability looks like. Today I live at Zephyr Place, a former hotel converted by CHT into 72 apartments using VHCB's funding. Many of the residents share a similar or more difficult story. We have a sense of community at Zephyr Place with a monthly coffee hour, ice cream socials and summer gardening activities with our property manager Larissa. These things matter so much to us.

Our Resident Services Coordinator Katy helped me turn my hobby, card making, into a small business. I now have a fulfilling life. I am able to volunteer in the community and make art during the few moments I am not in pain.

Through my art, I am able to help others express how much they care for one another. CHT has given me stability, safety and a new sense of purpose.

Thank you for having me. I hope you are able to fully fund VHCB, but I'm told that won't create as much housing as we need, so please fund it with even more if you can. There are just too many people that are still looking the stability that I've been able to find.