



Greetings Representative Marc Mihaly and members of the committee,

I am contacting you on behalf of the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity (CVOEO) as the Fair Housing Project Education & Outreach Coordinator. CVOEO is one of the state's five Community Action Agencies, serving more than 10,000 households (20,000+ individuals) annually through interconnected client-centered programs and services designed to combat poverty; work towards social, racial, economic, and environmental justice; and help people achieve economic independence.

The Fair Housing Project is one of CVOEO's Statewide Housing Advocacy Programs where we provide resources for all Vermonters regarding fair housing related issues and questions. Through this work we teach fair housing workshops which are offered to anyone in the state including community members, housing and service providers, municipal officials, and legislators. Additionally, we conduct fair housing consultations for people in vulnerable communities and educate them of their rights and protections, inform them of resources they can utilize to help remedy acts of illegal housing discrimination, and make suggestions for the next best steps they can take towards a solution for the conflict they are experiencing. Those suggestions could be giving tips for documenting incidents, providing sample forms to send letters to housing providers, assisting with filing complaints to VT Human Rights Commission and Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), or referring them to VT Legal Aid. This program is the only fair housing program in the state dedicated solely to Fair Housing education and outreach. We regularly coordinate with enforcement partners at VT Human Rights Commission and Vermont Legal Aid.

My testimony today coincides with the first day of Fair Housing Month, which is an opportunity to raise awareness about housing discrimination and celebrate diverse, inclusive communities. The Fair Housing Act was passed in 1968, and we continue to see acts of illegal housing discrimination take place against people with membership in protected classes. Most fair housing complaints are based on discrimination against people with disabilities, race and skin color, and family status from both a state and national perspective. The federal provision to “Affirmative Further Fair Housing” was recently terminated by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which makes awareness about the Fair Housing Act increasingly more important to continue to rectify the past harms from legal housing segregation and discrimination that have stained our communities and disenfranchised generations of families.

CVOEO’s statewide Housing Advocacy programs serve thousands of people each year. There are approximately 3,000 calls/emails from renters with questions and concerns related to legal and illegal evictions, illegal housing discrimination, and general inquiries about landlord/tenant laws such as rights surrounding security deposits and repairs. We have been seeing a significant increase in calls from elderly and disabled people seeking support with unaffordable rent increases, no cause evictions, and asking for support making reasonable accommodation/modification requests. Many people of protected classes also face the burdens of having low or fixed incomes which hinders their housing choice and ability to move, find, and sustain housing. We provide several hundred fair-housing-related consultations each year. For example, I did a consultation to explain fair housing rights to a single mother whose property manager made derogatory remarks about her parenting for being unmarried, I informed a recent college graduate of their right to make a reasonable accommodation request to break a lease as their anxiety disorder worsened due to being tirelessly bullied by their roommates, I also assisted a client with filing a fair housing complaint with the VT Human Rights commission after their

housing provider made discriminatory remarks about their gender identity. These are a few examples of the many consultations that have taken place over the past several months.

We provide basic fair housing training for hundreds of non-profit and for-profit housing providers each year, including more than 200 landlords participating in the Vermont Housing Improvement Program (VHIP). This information about fair housing rights and responsibilities – along with the foundations of landlord/tenant law - is essential to increasing education about people’s rights and responsibilities to help with self-advocacy and prevention of illegal housing discrimination.

When engaging with clients, people are often in a state of distress as they contemplate how to navigate experiencing discrimination without risking access to housing or losing the housing they have. Our clients always receive responses back to their inquiries and express gratitude for being able to talk through their situations, receive information about their rights, and get help with filing complaints; the resources we offer have proven to be of value. We treat those who utilize our services with dignity and practice our shared belief that everyone deserves access to safe, and equitably affordable housing regardless of their membership in protected classes.

It is crucial that we continue this work now more than ever as we experience a growing uncertainty of fair housing enforcement at the federal level of government. We serve vulnerable populations of people who often have barriers and economic limitations that limit their housing options. With an already tight housing market, we see an increase in housing discrimination especially towards historically marginalized and vulnerable people. Many people who reach out to us for workshops and consultations do not have specific knowledge about protected classes and are seeking to stay informed about fair housing rights. In my experience, clients that I work with find use in the services and information we provide whether they are a housing provider, homeowner, renter, or interested community member. As we move forward in this legislative

session, we are requesting that the authority of this committee is executed with prudence and consideration of fair housing laws when deciding on housing related legislation. We recommend passing legislation that includes the following suggestions:

1. Require fair housing education any time state funds are used to support private housing development.
2. Include communities of people that are vulnerable to housing discrimination as protected classes.
3. Authorize rent stabilization for all Vermonters with more specific protection for people with fixed incomes.
4. Make policies designed to fund and reduce barriers to housing development that include provisions for perpetually affordable housing.

We ask that you all stay mindful of how these policies affect who has access to housing and continue to progress fair housing initiatives. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Kahlia Livingston

Fair Housing Project Education & Outreach Coordinator

Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity

Klivingston@cvoeo.org, (802) 660-3456 ext 110