

**House Committee on General and Housing
Mental Health Advocacy Day 2026
Disability Rights Vermont Testimony
Lindsey St.Amour, Executive Director
January 29, 2026**

Good Morning, My name is Lindsey St.Amour, and I am the Executive Director at Disability Rights Vermont. I have been with the organization for over thirteen years.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you all today, on Mental Health Advocacy Day. Today is just a single moment in time when we've chosen to pay special attention to the needs of our community members with mental health diagnoses. But mental health advocacy should not happen on a single day or as a special occurrence. We ALL have mental health needs, it is a part of our humanity, and it is a fluid continuum that ALL of us experience.

For those of you less familiar with Disability Rights Vermont, we are the Protection and Advocacy agency for the entire state of Vermont. The Protection and Advocacy system was established after much attention in the media of horrific and negligent treatment of people with disabilities at a place operated by the State of New York that was supposed to be providing care to these individuals. The abuse and neglect was profound and shocking. As a result, P&As across the country receive a variety of federal grants to investigate and remedy abuse, neglect and serious rights violations impacting individuals with disabilities and perpetrated by state actors, facilities, caregivers, employers and others. Given our role as the P&A, Disability Rights Vermont is also designated by the Governor as Vermont's Mental Health Care Ombudsman.

This Committee has the most important and impactful task this year. Housing. Housing is at the very foundation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, it is one of the most essential, without it, all our other efforts for other aspects of health and wellbeing will be less successful if viable at all. Traditionally, shelter was considered to be the basic need, but history and data have now proven that housing, a fixed, safe, permanent structure is the basic need¹. So, thank you, for serving on this incredibly important Committee.

During the course of DRVT's work, we regularly observe and hear stories related to housing across the spectrum of what that might mean for someone. We hear stories of discrimination where someone is trying to get their feet underneath them, but

¹ <https://invisiblepeople.tv/why-housing-is-a-basic-need/#:~:text=Maslow's%20Hierarchy%20of%20Needs%20Lists,Maslow%2C%20is%20the%20Ultimate%20goal>

prospective employers won't even accept their application when their address is associated with or is a known shelter location. We hear stories of individuals being discharged from hospitals, correctional facilities, inpatient psychiatric facilities without an actual home to go to with the enormous task of maintaining their health and success with absolutely no stability in sight, where the risk of failure is either more institutionalization or death. We hear stories of individuals living in their cars, even through these dangerously cold winters, because there is not enough affordable housing for them to safely live.

The gamble could not be greater, and it should not be one Vermont is willing to make over and over again. We cannot continue to gamble with people's lives.

Not only is this gamble immoral, but it also is discriminatory. The intersection between people with mental health diagnoses and other disabilities amongst those individuals experiencing homelessness is extraordinary. In Vermont, 72 percent of rented households are severely cost burdened and at risk of homelessness. Homelessness in Vermont has increased by over 300 percent since the pandemic in 2020, resulting in at least 4,588 Vermonters, including more than 1,041 children, experiencing homelessness as of June 2025².

Of these individuals, 50% reported having a serious mental illness, 28% reported receiving social security benefits. More than 1,000 people disclosed having a physical disability, a developmental disability, or a chronic health disability³... and in some cases perhaps all of the above. This overrepresentation exemplifies the disproportionate impact Vermont's policies and practices are having on people with all types of disabilities. Now is the time to right this wrong.

As DRVT engages in conversations throughout the Statehouse regarding better access to community-based services, healthcare services, educational and employment opportunities, it all comes back to the reality of where those same individuals can lay their heads down at night. Let's say Vermont flips the switch and starts providing proactive and preventative care to people designed to improve successful integration for all Vermonters in all communities: appointments are made timely and regularly, prescriptions are available, food security is available, job opportunities arise and are given fair consideration, educational needs are supported and met... if you don't have a safe, stable place to return to with these other valuable parts of your life, you will have no place to put them down, to nurture them, to watch them grow. Until we house us all, we are set up as a state for failure.

² [Draft Bill- GENERAL-#386303-v2-26-0300 McGill; State and municipal public lands; life sustaining activities.pdf - Google Drive](#)

³ <https://helpingtohousevt.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/FINAL-State-of-Homelessness-2025.pdf>

For years I have been carrying around my hope for Vermont, that I try to share whenever I can... that hope is that one day Vermont will be a place whose goal is for its residents to THRIVE not just survive. You can survive with shelter, but you can THRIVE with housing. I offer this goal to this committee, and I thank you for your commitment to this state and to ALL of its residents.

Thank you,

Lindsey St.Amour