

Mike Foote - Witness Testimony
House General Committee – Vermont State House
In Support of Base Funding for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board

Photo 1

Introduction

Good morning, committee members,

Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify today, and thank you for your time and leadership supporting organizations that are central to strong Vermont communities, like the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board.

My name is Mike Foote. I'm the Executive Director of The DREAM Program, a Vermont-based nonprofit that partners with affordable housing neighborhoods to provide year-round mentoring, summer programs, and outdoor experiences for youth in low-income households across the state, and beyond. DREAM supports over 800 young people across 47 affordable housing neighborhoods and schools.

In honor of Valentine's day, I thought I'd let you know that we at DREAM LOVE the VHCB.

And I'm here today to share how the VHCB's investment in our work has catalyzed significant social and financial return for Vermonters, and express my strong support for continued state investment in them - specifically to urge you to support full base funding at \$37.6 million, as included in the Governor's Recommended FY27 budget.

About DREAM

For context, a little about my organization. We provide year-round and long-term youth services for families living in affordable housing neighborhoods. Our service model is grounded in two pillars of healthy youth development: 1) long-term, trusting relationships and 2) access to enriching experiences. Our program design emphasizes deep partnership with the management agencies and residents of these neighborhoods across the state. Some of our housing partnerships include:

- Northwoods Apartments in White River Junction and Hollow Drive in Wilder, managed by the Vermont State Housing Authority
- Willowbrook and Beech Court Apartments managed by the Bennington Housing Authority
- Elm Street Apartments managed by the Winooski Housing Authority

- Birchwood Mobile Home Park in Milton
- And many others

We are also embedded in 17 highschool-elementary school partnerships around the state, in almost every county.

History with VHCB

Our partnership with VHCB began in a pretty unlikely way.

DREAM incorporated in Vermont in the early 2000s, with the mission of closing the opportunity gap for youth in low-income households. Run by a group of scrappy recent college grads. As our work gained momentum, we recognized the need for continuity of services across the summer months, to combat the sizable summer learning and developmental slide that disproportionately affects kids from low-income households.

A summer camp fit the bill nicely... except for the *actual* bill of building one from the ground up.

So we started looking for land and a pathway for acquisition. (A group of idealistic twenty-somethings touring parcels with a *very* patient real estate agent).

Then we found a hidden gem, a 54-acre parcel in Fletcher, with almost 1500 feet of frontage on Metcalf Pond – surrounded by working forest and nestled in the foothills at the top of the Missisquoi watershed.

Since we worked so closely with affordable housing agencies and neighborhoods around the state, someone suggested we call VHCB and pitch our idea of creating an environmental-focused overnight adventure base for youth in affordable housing neighborhoods.

Photo 2

I'll save you the process-details, but: I still remember opening the letter that told us that VHCB was going to invest and that Camp DREAM would become a reality. Fittingly, we opened the letter at Elm Street Apartments in Winooski, where our future first campers lived.

Camp DREAM now boasts a number of opportunities: hiking, swimming, boating, arts & crafts, archery, ecology programming, ropes course, campfires, homesteading, garden-to-table activities, and so much more. And we don't stop with summer? Ongoing seasonal adventures and Camp DREAM's signature Winter Adventure Camp - snow-filled weekends of outdoor fun

and bonding with mentors and youth - are highly anticipated events for our DREAMers. Picture broomball on the frozen pond, snowshoeing, introductions to cross-country skiing, and sleeping in snow domes.

More recently, we re-partnered again with the VHCB to add a small island on the pond to our Camp offerings, to add to the wonder and adventure our campers' experience. A canoe destination... a place to learn about and explore pond ecology... a special destination for camp traditions.

Photo 3

Because of the VHCB, Camp DREAM has built memories, developed young minds, and provided a safe, outdoor space for some of the most vulnerable youth in our communities to play, learn, explore, and achieve across two+ decades. Research shows that overnight camp boosts self-reliance, develops perseverance, and grows confidence,... it acts as a relationship-accelerator for youth and their mentors, and provides key opportunities for positive risk taking.

Return & Impact of VHCB's Investment

Just to briefly share some details on the economic return on VHCB's investment in Camp DREAM.

Since we acquired the property:

- DREAM has raised and invested over \$2 million in facilities at the camp that support outdoor recreation and year-round utilization. From a regional economic development perspective, we often purchase from local suppliers, such as LSF forest products down the camp road, which has provided much of the lumber to build our cabins and other spaces.
- We also employ local contractors and technicians, like our carpenter, Rhine Hallquist, or plumber, Dave Bushey, and others.
- We now invest over \$3.5 million annually in operating youth programming in Vermont. And we have numerous local and regional program partnerships for camp (4H, local CSAs). We are currently establishing a relationship with upstream VT to provide hands on ecology research experience, contribute to long-term pond data collection and address invasive species.
- We bring in out of state funding from our 5000+ alumni and federal sources, over \$2 million annually... so many of these these resources I am referring to are a net economic gain for our state.

Photo 4

- And of course most importantly, Camp DREAM has served thousands of children at no cost to their families, enabling access to life changing educational and developmental opportunities.
- In addition to hosting our DREAMers, Camp DREAM has become a reliable outdoor resource for Boy Scout and Girl Scout Troops, Fletcher Elementary, and others, supporting a host of public good organizations around the state.

All of this catalyzed by that singular investment from VHCB.

Why this funding matters now

As federal supports for vulnerable children and families become more uncertain, Vermont's commitments to institutions like VHCB matter more than ever.

VHCB funding is not just a line item. I see it as statement of our values. A way to ensure all Vermonters have both security and opportunity. Because of your commitment to VHCB and their forward thinking staff and board, they have acted as a catalyst for my organization, which then has contributed many fold back in social and economic return, while protecting the outdoor spaces that make our state so unique.

On behalf of the children, families, and communities DREAM serves, thank you, and I respectfully encourage you to support full base funding for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board at \$37.6 million.

Thank you for your time, and I'm happy to answer any questions about our work and relationship with VHCB.