

Good afternoon, Chair and members of the Committee.

For the record, my name is Taylor Thibault, and I serve as Co-Chair of the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance.

I want to begin by acknowledging the thoughtful work that has gone into this bill and the shared goal of strengthening Vermont's homelessness response system. I believe we are aligned in wanting a system that is coordinated, equitable, and responsive to need.

I would like to speak specifically about Coordinated Entry.

Coordinated Entry is a HUD-defined system designed to prioritize households experiencing homelessness for housing resources based on acuity and vulnerability. In Chittenden County, our system is intentionally structured as a housing prioritization tool. It is built to match scarce housing interventions, such as Permanent Supportive Housing, to those with the highest level of need.

In recent discussion, it appears there may be interest in expanding Coordinated Entry to prioritize not only housing resources, but also broader forms of shelter access, housing retention supports, and potentially other services within the proposed continuum.

I want to be clear that the idea of strengthening coordination across the system is one we support. However, expanding Coordinated Entry in this way would represent a significant structural shift and would require careful implementation planning.

First, it is important to note that our current assessment tools are designed specifically for housing placements. They are structured to evaluate long-term housing need, vulnerability, and sustainability. That framework is fundamentally different from assessing eligibility or prioritization for emergency shelter.

Emergency shelter operates under different conditions. Individual shelters often have distinct eligibility criteria, program models, safety considerations, and staffing capacities. These are not uniform across providers. Integrating shelter placement into Coordinated Entry would therefore require significant alignment work to standardize criteria and clarify referral pathways in a way that preserves each program's operational realities.

Additionally, in Chittenden County, we are currently operating at full capacity with respect to completing housing assessments. Even with a housing-focused scope, ensuring that all eligible households are assessed and case conferenced requires substantial coordination and staffing. Expanding assessments to include all individuals seeking shelter would require meaningful additional assessment infrastructure and workforce capacity to ensure that the process remains timely and does not unintentionally delay access to crisis services.

More broadly, if Coordinated Entry is expected to serve as the central prioritization mechanism for prevention, shelter, retention, and housing services across the continuum, this would require:

- Significant change management across regions;
- Restructuring and redesigning assessment tools;
- Retraining frontline staff and partner agencies;
- Development of new referral definitions and workflows;
- A longer implementation timeline to redesign system operations;
- Expanded housing navigation and case management staffing; and
- Broad buy-in from community partners, healthcare systems, behavioral health providers, and other state departments.

Coordinated Entry can prioritize need, but it cannot resolve need if there is insufficient service and housing capacity behind it.

If the system expands to hold all individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness, we will more visibly see the gaps that already exist in larger systems; inpatient mental health access, long-term behavioral health supports, substance use treatment, and affordable housing supply. We experience this daily at our shelters, where we accommodate individuals who require higher levels of care because there are limited alternatives available.

If the Legislature intends to expand Coordinated Entry's scope, then that policy shift must be paired with:

- Dedicated infrastructure funding;
- Workforce expansion;
- Cross-department coordination;
- Clear operational guidance; and
- A phased implementation strategy.

My intent in raising these considerations is not to oppose expansion, but to ensure that expectations are aligned with operational realities. Coordinated Entry is a powerful tool. If we are going to ask it to do more, we must build it accordingly.

Thank you for your time and your continued work on this legislation.