



## **Testimony of Vermont Legal Aid on H.594 House Committee on Human Services**

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Thank you, Chair Wood and members of the Committee.

For the record, my name is Deanna Hartog, and I'm the Poverty Law Fellow with the Poverty Law Project and Vermont Legal Aid. My two-year fellowship is focused on advocating and providing legal services for people experiencing homelessness. I'm now in my second year of my fellowship, and appreciate the opportunity to provide some testimony based on what I've learned so far.

I want to start by saying this plainly and sincerely: Vermont Legal Aid does not believe that H.594, in its current form, will achieve the outcome we know this committee wants to see - ending homelessness and reducing unsheltered homelessness in Vermont.

At the same time, we appreciate the opportunity to testify today. We recognize that every member of this committee cares deeply about this issue. We know that this bill reflects real concern, real urgency, and bipartisan leadership around a crisis that affects thousands of Vermonters - including many of our clients. We welcome the opportunity to work with you, because we believe we share the same goal: keeping people safe, housed, and building a system that actually works in the real world.

I'm going to provide a high-level overview of our concerns with H.594 and, importantly, what we believe *would* work based on data, lived experience, and decades of evidence.

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### **The Core Problem with H.594**

At its core, H.594 is built around restrictions, sanctions, time limits, and sorting mechanisms - all in a reality where there is nowhere for people to go.

The bill assumes that if we tighten eligibility, impose deadlines, and require compliance, people will move more quickly into permanent housing. But that assumption does not match what's happening on the ground in Vermont today.

The reality is this:

- Vermont does not have enough affordable housing
- Vermont does not have enough shelter capacity
- Vermont does not have enough case managers
- Vermont does not have enough supportive housing for people with disabilities or complex needs

When those structural realities exist, rationing shelter does not reduce homelessness - it increases unsheltered homelessness.

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### **Residency Requirements and the “Return Home” Program**

One of our most serious concerns is the bill's reliance on residency requirements and the so-called “Return Home” program.

The bill conditions access to emergency housing on proof of Vermont residency and then creates a program that pays to relocate people who are deemed “non-residents” out of state.

This approach raises profound constitutional, legal, and ethical concerns, but I want to focus on the practical harm.

This proposal is built on a false assumption: that Vermont is a magnet for people experiencing homelessness.

There is no data to support that claim. Reporting here in Vermont has shown that the vast majority of people experiencing homelessness in Vermont became homeless here, because rents have skyrocketed, vacancies have disappeared, and wages have not kept up. People are not coming to Vermont for services - they are losing housing in Vermont.

When we base policy on a myth, we get bad outcomes.

The structure of this bill creates a coercive system: deny people shelter based on residency, then offer relocation as the only alternative. For someone sleeping outside in January, that is not a voluntary choice - it is desperation.

Programs like this have been tried [elsewhere](#). The evidence shows they do not end homelessness; they simply move it from one place to another, often temporarily, and often with devastating human consequences.

Vermont should not be in the business of exporting people in crisis. We should be investing in solutions that actually stabilize people where they are.

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### **Arbitrary Time Limits Do Not Match Reality**

H.594 imposes strict time limits - 60 days for some placements, 180 days for others.

Those timelines might make sense on paper. They do not make sense in Vermont's housing market.

DCF's own data shows that even with "significant services," only a small portion of people successfully transition to permanent housing within these timeframes. The 2025 [Point-in-Time-Count](#) shows that 76% of people experiencing homelessness have been unhoused for 91 days or longer, including 58% who have been homeless for 180 days or longer and 32% who have been homeless for more than a year. 60 or even 180 days is simply not enough time to find affordable, accessible, stable housing in Vermont's current market.

We also know from the [Vermont State Auditor's recent report](#) nearly half of people placed through Coordinated Entry are returning to homelessness. Time-limited programs that push people out before housing is available do not create stability - they create churn. People cycle between shelters, motels, encampments, hospitals, and jails.

If the goal is fewer people experiencing homelessness, forcing people out of shelter before housing exists moves us in the opposite direction.

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### **Punitive Sanctions and Disability**

Another major concern is the bill's use of punitive sanctions -including 30-day periods of ineligibility for things like noncompliance, declining placements, or undefined "misconduct."

In practice, these sanctions disproportionately harm people with disabilities, mental illness, trauma histories, and substance use disorders.

The bill includes a disability exception, but it places the burden on people in crisis to prove that their behavior was disability-related - often requiring documentation that people simply cannot obtain while homeless.

Our casework shows this clearly. We routinely see people sanctioned not because they violated rules, but because they behaved like people who are traumatized, disabled, or sick. When placements fail, the solution should be a different placement, not putting someone back on the street.

Punishment does not stabilize people. Housing does.

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### **Due Process: Notice and Appeals Matter**

Emergency housing is often the difference between safety and serious harm. Yet under the current system - and under this bill - people frequently lose housing with little or no advance notice. When we're talking about something as critical as housing, day-of notice is simply insufficient.

Section 7(b) requires written notice including the factual and legal basis for decisions, effective dates, and appeal rights. This is good and we support it.

However, DCF does not give people prior written notice before people lose their emergency housing and, in the context of the class action *Groundworks* case, DCF has denied that they are required by law to do so. This violates due process and is also cruel and bad practice.

In many cases, people do not know they are being exited until the day they lose their emergency housing. This is particularly bad in times of mass exits, but it also happens in regular time. In a recent case at Vermont Legal Aid, a client was told on Tuesday that she had been approved for another seven days of emergency housing, only to be woken up on Wednesday by a call saying she had to be out by 11 that same day. This client has serious medical problems and trauma from a recent criminal assault. She was crying uncontrollably when we met her. She was actually eligible to remain in emergency housing, but it took several days to find out that DCF just wanted a copy of her cane prescription to confirm her eligibility. She lost her emergency housing for five days before it was sorted out. Had she gotten advance written notice, the paperwork issue could have been resolved without the

traumatic, chaotic, and awful period of losing emergency housing due to a paperwork error.

Due process is not a technicality. It is a stabilizing force.

People need clear, written information about:

- How long they are approved
- What they need to do to stay eligible
- When and why they might lose housing
- How to appeal

And this information should be provided before someone is being kicked out of a motel with nowhere else to go.

Without this, the system becomes chaotic and traumatic - for families, for providers, and for the state.

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### **Tiered Shelter Systems Create Harm**

H.594 relies heavily on tiered shelter and housing models, which sort people based on perceived compliance or stability.

These systems inevitably create categories of “deserving” and “less deserving” people. They disadvantage those with the greatest needs and reward those who already face fewer barriers.

The evidence is clear: low-barrier, non-punitive access to shelter and housing leads to better outcomes, not worse ones.

Homelessness is a system failure—not a moral one. Our policies should reflect that.

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### **The Unanswered Question: Where Do People Go?**

Perhaps the most important question this bill does not answer is: where are people supposed to go?

Shelters are already full. Staff are burned out and underpaid. Building new capacity takes time, money, and workforce investment.

The bill contemplates reducing motel use before alternatives exist. If that happens, people will not disappear - they will move into encampments, emergency rooms, and the criminal legal system. That is more expensive, more dangerous, and more harmful.

Cutting shelter without alternatives does not solve homelessness. It displaces it.

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## **What Actually Works**

We know what works, because we have seen it.

The most successful homelessness reduction efforts in this country - including among veterans - share common elements:

1. A commitment to housing everyone, not just those who meet behavioral thresholds
2. Access to permanent affordable and supportive housing, including for people with disabilities, eviction histories, and criminal records
3. A well-supported workforce with fair wages, training, and career paths
4. Robust case management and housing navigation, scaled to real need

These approaches cost less in the long run and save lives.

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## **Closing**

Vermont is at a critical moment in how we respond to homelessness.

We can choose policies that ration shelter, impose restrictions, and push people into deeper crisis - or we can choose evidence-based solutions that house people, stabilize them, and reduce homelessness over time.

Vermont Legal Aid urges this committee to fundamentally reconsider H.594 as drafted. We stand ready to work with you to build a bill that reflects the realities on the ground and the values we share.

Thank you for your time, your leadership, and your commitment to Vermonters in crisis. I'm happy to answer any questions.