

## **Ernest Cormia Testimony House Human Services H. 594**

Good Morning. For the record, I am Ernest Cormia from Rutland.

I want to start by telling you a little bit about myself. I was diagnosed with Muscular Dystrophy when I was 22. At the time I was working for South Burlington construction. I was on a Jack Hammer when it hit me. The doctor told me that as the years went on, my muscles would deteriorate. And every year, I got weaker and weaker. I had to stop working in my late twenties. And since then I have lived on disability, I receive around \$1000/month.

I have four adult children, two of whom live in Rutland and two out of state. They give me incredible help, but they do not have the resources to have me live with them or support me financially, so, I live entirely on social security. That means that I can not afford any available apartment without a subsidy of some kind.

I became homeless after I was living with my son Tyler and renting a room off of him for \$400, unfortunately the landlord sold the house. My son had a hard time finding an apartment and definitely could not find one that my wheelchair could go into. It is too much for my son to be responsible for taking care of me because he has kids of his own and I did not put him on this earth to take care of me. I want all my children to have their own lives and not be held back by my disability. They already do so much for me.

So he took that apartment and I did not have a place to go and ended up in the hotel program. I was in the program for about three years.

I was sheltered at the Cortina, PATH helped me get there and I was there for the majority of the time that I was in the program. While there, at first I had access to services and then the services were taken out of the hotels. Then in 2023 when the plan was created to let people remain sheltered if they were sheltered by June 30th. I was, but, I relied on others to renew my voucher and no one did, so at first I was not included in that group.

That was when I first found End Homelessness Vermont. They were there and knew that I had by no fault of my own not been included in that group. My son came to me and said that Brenda Siegel can try to help you. She took over and was trying to help me. I also had help from Vanessa at BROCC.

Then in October of 2024 I had used my 80 days and was exited from the program. I was allowed at first to remain in Cortina without paying. End Homelessness Vermont had arranged it with them and they figured out a way to keep me sheltered until December, when I could get back into the program. But I had to be moved to Pine Tree.

And then after the Cold Weather, the Governor created an executive order, but I was denied under that order. They would not believe that I was disabled. I had to go through a fair hearing,

though it was really Brenda going through the fair hearing, because due to my disability and health I was not able to do that on my own.

Throughout all of this, the state kept referring me to VCCI nurses and others, but, no one would listen to me about what I needed. And I couldn't get to the door on my own. So when people tried to help, I kept saying that "I have to wait for my kids to come". And they took that as me refusing services. I got tired of it and eventually said, "right now I am overwhelmed and under a lot of pressure and I want to get these extra services after I am housed so that I feel stable". But, I never stopped working with Vanessa and Shelby on finding apartments and filling out applications upon applications. I just wasn't moving up the list.

Finally in November, just before Thanksgiving, I got a place through the Rutland Housing Authority. I can't forget it. I got the keys to my apartment. I was able to throw a turkey in my own oven. I have not had that in, oh my god, years. I love cooking. I was just so happy and it did not fully hit me for a few days. The day of Thanksgiving when I was sitting at the table with all my kids, it finally hit me, that I was sitting in my own apartment. I started crying, I was so happy.

Now Shelby and EHVT are helping me connect more to medical providers, apply for Choices For Care and I have been doing physical therapy two or three days since I have been housed. I needed to be housed first. I don't know if anyone has lived in a hotel or been homeless for so many years, but, it is a lot of stress. I needed to find a stable place to be, where I was not always worried I would be carried outside and left there.

All the pressure to do more while I was living in this situation with no way to get out only made me more depressed. It was not what I needed.

Now I am home. Now it's great and I can do all of the things that people wanted me to do. I never was refusing services, I just knew what was best for me and I needed people to listen to me. Brenda and Shelby listened to me. Vanessa from BROCC listened to me. That is how I finally was housed.

It was not my fault I was homeless and I need support, not rules to get me where I am today. I am so happy that I am home.

Thank you all for the opportunity to testify today. If sharing my story, helps one person, it is worth sharing.