

Good afternoon and thank you for giving me the time to speak with you today.

My name is **Roxanne Carelli**, and I am the **Executive Director of Operational Development and Shelter Services for the Bennington County Coalition for the Homeless**. I want you to know right up front—I'm not someone who speaks in polished political language. I speak from experience, from the heart, and from what I see every single day in our community.

I'm here today because **H.594 matters**. It can change how people live, where they sleep, and whether they are safe. And the people most affected by it are not in this room—so today, **we are their voice**.

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## Who We Are Actually Serving

In Bennington County, we desperately need more **year-round shelter and housing**, and we need it to be **inclusive by design**.

Right now, our system is built around assumptions—that people are either single adults or traditional families. But that's not who is showing up at our doors.

We see non-traditional families.

We see people with serious medical and mental health needs.

We see elders and we see unaccompanied youth.

We see Veterans.

We see victims of DV and SV.

We see those with criminal backgrounds.

We see people in recovery and active drug users.

We see people who simply cannot afford permanent housing.

We see people who cannot survive in congregate shelter, and people who do not meet the criteria of a traditional family shelter.

When people are turned away it's not because they don't need shelter, it's because they don't fit the definition tied to the funding, or because they cannot safely coexist in the space available.

That is heartbreaking.

And it is fixable.

H.594 needs to support **inclusive shelter units, not just shelter beds**, so we can meet people where they are—not where a rule says they should be.

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## Funding That Doesn't Match Reality

We currently have **\$500,000 in HUD earmarked funds**, and we are actively looking for property. While we are grateful for that support, I need to be honest with you—that amount does not buy and renovate enough property to meaningfully serve our community. And even if it did, **capital funding alone does not keep the doors open**.

Shelters don't run on good intentions. They run on staff, heat, utilities, food, essential needs, case management, housing navigation, safety, and support. Without **guaranteed, long-term operating funds**, we are setting projects up to struggle—and possibly fail.

H.594 needs to clearly tie **long-term operating dollars to capital investments**, or we will keep building plans instead of solutions.

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## Congregate Shelter Isn't Working

I also need to say this plainly:

**Congregate shelter is not the answer for most people.**

Every day, people are turned away in Bennington County because congregate spaces are unsafe or inaccessible for them, especially people with trauma histories, medical needs, mental health challenges and/or the need for stable sober living.

This is not because providers aren't trying hard enough.  
It's because the system was not designed with these realities in mind.

H.594 must make room for **non-congregate, low-barrier options**, alongside shelters with programs and more structure for people who are ready for that. One size does not fit all—and pretending it does is hurting people.

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## Short-Term Fixes Aren't Fixing Anything

We continue to pour money into short-term emergency responses—pop-up shelters, extreme weather sites, and motel placements.

And I understand why. When someone is freezing, you act. Several of us have been doing exactly that for the past four nights, with no immediate relief in sight.

But these temporary shelters are **crippling the very providers who are already exhausted** from supporting our most vulnerable neighbors all day, every day.

These approaches are expensive, exhausting, and temporary. They don't allow consistency, stability, or real progress toward permanent housing. They keep us reacting instead of solving.

H.594 should help Vermont move away from repeating these emergency cycles and toward **real, lasting infrastructure**.

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## **GA Cuts Will Have Real Consequences**

I also want to speak directly about the upcoming reduction of **General Assistance to 400 rooms**.

I need you to hear this clearly:

If this happens before we open more shelter units, it will once again increase homelessness in Bennington County and across Vermont.

This isn't a prediction, it's a certainty. When emergency options are reduced before permanent ones exist, people end up outside, in cars, and in unsafe situations.

Isn't our mission to end homelessness?

As H.594 is currently written, it reduces emergency options faster than it builds permanent ones—**that gap is where people fall**, and we fail!

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## **Timelines Matter**

Two years ago, about **\$10 million** was available statewide for shelter development. Bennington County received none of it—not because the need wasn't there, and not because we didn't have solid plans, but because we didn't already have property ready to go.

That's not because we didn't work hard enough.

It's because **real development takes time**, especially in rural communities.

Property owners do not hand over keys because funding might be coming. Sellers cannot wait months for reimbursement. Reimbursement grants work for operations—but **we need a better, faster way to acquire and renovate properties** if we are serious about expanding shelter.

H.594 needs to reflect that reality, or communities like ours will continue to be left behind.

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## What We Are Asking For

What we are asking for is not unreasonable. We are asking for:

- More **year-round, non-congregate, inclusive shelters**
  - Support for both **low-barrier shelters** and **program-based shelters**
  - **Operating funds that come with capital funding**
  - **Realistic timelines** that rural communities can actually meet.
  - Housing and support for **elders, people in recovery, those with medical and mental health needs, veterans, and unaccompanied youth**
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## Closing

I want to end by saying this:

The people doing this work every day are tired—but we are not giving up. We believe Vermont can do better than managing homelessness forever. We believe that together we can end it!

You have a chance right now, through H.594, to help us profoundly change the outcome.

To listen.

To trust those of us on the ground.

To be brave enough to do this differently.

If you do that, you will be our **heroes**—not in a symbolic way, but in a real one. Because the decisions you make here will determine whether people are safe, housed, and supported.

Thank you for listening.

Thank you for caring.

And thank you, in advance, for taking action.