

Tamara Hodge Testimony House Human Services H.594

Good Morning, For the record, I am Tamara Hodge. I work at End Homelessness Vermont doing our intake and communication with clients about day to day needs as it pertains to their emergency housing and once housed permanent housing as well. However, today I am here as a person that was in the GA Program and is now housed.

I was here in this same seat, with all of you, two years ago but so much has changed since then. I want to start by saying that I can not support h.594 as drafted, not based on my lived experience and not based on what I've seen now in my work in the field. But I'll come back to that.

First let me tell you a little about me. I am a mom of 3 school aged children and I have children with complex needs. I'm from Vermont, born and raised here. I moved from Vermont to South Carolina in May of 2020 to find support in recovery. Fast forward to 2023 when we ended up moving back to Vermont because my father's health was declining. We were supposed to have a house all set up here. Two weeks after we got here, our house wasn't ready and it turned out the landlord had rented it to someone else. We were left with nowhere to go. Sitting in my little Toyota Camry with all of our stuff packed around us, I had no clue what we were going to do. Living with family was never a possibility for me, so we were left with nothing.

At that point I called 211 and ended up in the hotel/motel program. They gave us only 28 days, because they did not count either my sister in law or my mother's letter as constructive eviction. At the end of our 28 days, we were going to end up outside, with 3 children & were offered nothing but a tent, in the middle of October. I was terrified. I lost my left lung April of 2019. While in the hotel program, I had to use a nebulizer 4 times a day at some points. The stress and constant panic exacerbated things so badly for me.

Many people here have not heard about my time in GA. So briefly, what I will tell you is that my life was saved and my children's lives were made better by service providers who did in fact provide services in the hotels. My caseworker, Janice at Springfield Supported Housing referred me to End Homelessness Vermont who began a process of helping us prove that this eviction counted for 84 days under the then rules. EHVT even paid for us for three weeks, I believe that I said in this committee 2 years ago that I couldn't be sure, but, I thought that they might have paid for some of it out of their own pockets. Being on the inside now, I now know that was absolutely the case. Taking from themselves & their families to help me & mine. I couldn't be more grateful. And now I know how hard it is to refrain from doing just that when you see so many people suffering.

During that time, every day I would go back to the hotel after picking up my kids from school to find that I had been locked out of our room. I would wait for someone from EHVT to come help us pay for our room, one night at a time. Even after that decision was reversed I had a gap in days. Again EHVT and Springfield Supported Housing came in to help me and my family.

It was that budget year that an 80 day cap was implemented. I made friends in the hotel who ended up outside, but I, just DAYS before my 80 days ran out, got so lucky and found housing. That was not because there was a deadline or because there was extra pressure. That was because I got lucky. Many of my friends did end up outside. I did not try harder, I was luckier and I had providers who listened to what I said that I needed, rather than telling me what I needed. I never once felt judged by my providers, like I often did by the state & still do at times by the news. Some of the folks my family & I met in the hotels have since died from being unsheltered. And so many of my clients, whom I have formed connections & built trust with have ended up the same way. Suffering outside, freezing, begging for help & feeling unnoticed.

Throughout my time in homelessness, I kept up with all of my paperwork. I applied for every apartment, but, I could not understand the systems due to my own disability and my mental health was spiraling out of control. I suffer from depression and severe anxiety disorder & have been in Recovery for coming up on 6 years now. I couldn't handle the pressure and could not navigate the systems on my own. Keeping up with the requirements and changes was a full time job and I never quite understood it, I needed guidance through the process.

What made it easier was having services that took some of the work off of me. That put almost no additional pressure on me and asked me what I needed. That freed me to focus on the housing piece and relieved me of my constant guilt, shame and panic that I couldn't take care of my family and we were going to end up outside.

The thing is, now I have seen that same thing work over and over again throughout my work. We have a no reject policy and we meet people exactly where they are at. Just as I was met by the same organization exactly where I was, without any judgement.

It is not more requirements or more regulations that made my family stable. It was being relieved of them. It was having someone to listen and give me what I needed. It was being able to not be ok when I was not ok without being told I was failing or doing something wrong. It was never the endless hoops I was forced to jump through & hitting wall after wall, or feeling like I was drowning just to try & keep my family sheltered.

I was housed in early October of 2024. Since then my kids have been able to better regulate without fear, panic and stress. Since then, my breathing has gotten better and I no longer need my nebulizer 4 times a day. Since then my mental health has greatly improved. Since then my wife and I have been able to have peace and our own space to grow as a family.

I now have a career job, where I help people exactly as I was helped. I build relationships & trust with people who are at their lowest & just need someone to listen to them and their needs & to help guide them to the finish line. I never could have imagined getting to this place when I was experiencing homelessness myself. But, just about 1 month after I was housed, I was hired part time by the Good Samaritan Haven and part time by End Homelessness Vermont. In July after Good Sam's grant ended, I transitioned to full time at End Homelessness Vermont. Every

single day since, I get to give exactly what I received. Compassion, kindness, understanding and peer led support to people living with disabilities at the intersection of homelessness.

Homelessness is not the result of people doing something wrong. It is not about people who need to be fixed. It is about people who need & deserve a home. And when they find home, it is about making sure that they have whatever they need to be successful. When I was experiencing homelessness it was hard to imagine that I could manage successfully. I was so traumatized. But I could & I did. I just needed people to believe in me and to hear me.

I can not support H594 because it is framed as an “accountability” bill and because it has a huge focus on sending people out of state if they have the connections to do so, when the percent of folks who come here from out of state is such a small number.

I can not support the Governors housing proposal because it leaves so many people outside to suffer, get sick, develop disabilities or even die. And I have seen way too many people die since the state even reduced the allowed time in GA down to 80 days. A proposal that does not keep people sheltered or that categorizes people into deserving and undeserving is not something I could ever get behind. I see what that looks like every day and I saw firsthand long before I had this job.

I have some specific elements that I definitely would like to see in a bill that can work:

1. No reduction in eligibility, everyone deserves to be sheltered.
2. Fund case management in the hotels, street outreach and specialized service coordinators for people with disabilities whom are independent so that they can operate and advocate in a way that best meets the needs of the households they serve.
3. Create accountability for systems to meet disability needs as defined by the ADA and Vermont law. This is not a definition that can or should be narrowed. The definition of disability is not a negotiation.
4. Do not reduce Shelter without a one to one match of non congregate shelter beds
5. Give people access to what I had, because that is what works.
6. Put dignity of the people we serve at the center.
7. Offer housing options: i.e. tiny homes, single room occupancies and mobile homes.
8. Do not build shelter for 5000 people, build homes. But keep people sheltered while they are built.
9. Have an alternative rental subsidy that does not have the barriers of federal funding, like evictions, criminal record and more. Make it more accessible

Please look to what has worked. What systems have gotten people into housing and follow those models. Both Pathways and End Homelessness Vermont are experts at keeping people in housing once they get there. All of the providers we work with know what they are doing. And when they don’t, they reach out to someone who does. This system is full of effective underfunded and overworked experts in this field. We need look to what we already have

I want to end by saying that my life is so much better since I found housing. My family is safe, happy, healthy & thriving. Housing happened because I was heard. Housing happened because I was lucky enough to find providers who saw and treated me & my family as human beings, not case numbers.

Finally, I want to say thank you all so much for inviting me to testify today. I am very grateful for the opportunity.