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Testimony on H. 657

Sections 4, 13, and 14

Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Services and Judicial Review of Extended Care Placements

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Elevate Youth Services

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

At Elevate Youth Services, we work with young people across Central Vermont who are navigating homelessness, family rupture, and system involvement. Many of the youth we serve are moving between systems that were never designed to work together. When policy gets it right, it closes dangerous gaps. When it doesn't, young people fall through them.

I want to speak to Section 4 and Sections 13 and 14 through the lens of safety, stability, and developmental fit.

Section 4 — Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Access Without Parental Consent

Section 4 reflects a reality youth-serving providers see every day.

We regularly work with 16- and 17-year-olds who are not in the custody of a parent or guardian. Some have been forced to leave home. Some are fleeing violence. Some have parents who are simply absent. Many are trying to stay in school while couch surfing, sleeping in cars, or moving between unstable situations.

These young people are already navigating independence. The law simply hasn't caught up.

Allowing certified unaccompanied homeless youth to access identification, health care, employment, banking, and education without parental consent removes barriers that currently trap youth in crisis. Without identification, a young person cannot get a job. Without documentation, they cannot enroll in school. Without consent pathways, they cannot access health care.

From a service provider perspective, this section moves policy closer to the lived reality of the youth we serve. I support its intent.

How This Intersects With the Basic Center Program

I do want to highlight how this policy intersects with a program many Vermont providers operate: the **Basic Center Program**, funded through the federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

Through this program, we can place a young person experiencing homelessness in a short-term shelter setting for **up to twenty one days**, often in the home of a trained community member. During that time, the focus is stabilization and family mediation. Youth and families engage in counseling with the goal of repairing relationships and, when safe, reunifying.

Right now, that placement requires **parent or guardian consent**.

If Section 4 passes, it would likely allow programs like ours to shelter youth for that short period **with guardian's implied consent**, which could be a meaningful step forward. It would allow us to respond quickly when a young person has nowhere safe to go.

But it raises an important practical question.

What happens after those twenty one days?

The Basic Center Program was designed as a short-term stabilization intervention. It assumes that a young person will either reunify safely with family or transition into another appropriate placement.

In Vermont, that next step is often unclear.

The Housing Gap for Youth Under 18

If more 16- and 17-year-olds are able to access services independently under Section 4, we must be honest about the current gaps in our system.

Most of the housing and shelter options available in Vermont are designed for **young adults ages 18–24**.

Emergency shelters and transitional living programs play a vital role in the continuum of care, but they are not typically designed with younger adolescents in mind. Transitional living programs, in particular, are intentionally structured to provide **lower contact and minimal supervision** as young adults build independence.

Those models work well for emerging adults. They are often not appropriate for youth who are still in adolescence and may need more consistent adult presence.

Similarly, shelters serving older youth and adults may not always be developmentally appropriate environments for 16- and 17-year-olds.

So while Section 4 expands access in important ways, it may also increase the number of younger adolescents seeking shelter without expanding the **age-appropriate housing options available to them**.

We risk creating a situation where providers can stabilize a young person for two weeks, but then have no safe and developmentally appropriate place for them to go.

A Needed Investment: Youth-Specific Shelter

If Vermont is serious about addressing youth homelessness, this policy change should be paired with investment in youth-specific housing infrastructure.

One critical step would be funding **24/7 staffed shelter beds designed specifically for unaccompanied homeless youth under 18**.

Youth-specific shelters with round-the-clock staffing provide the supervision, safety, and relational support that younger adolescents need. They also reduce reliance on inappropriate placements and prevent escalation into other systems such as juvenile justice or deeper child welfare involvement.

Right now, in many parts of the state, those options simply do not exist.

Expanding legal pathways for youth to access services is important. But access must be paired with places that are truly safe for them to land.

Sections 13 and 14 — Judicial Review of Extended Care Placements

I also want to briefly speak to Sections 13 and 14, which would require judicial review before placing a young person exiting DCF custody into an aftercare program.

Oversight and due process matter. But we should be cautious about creating processes that unintentionally slow down placements during an already fragile transition.

Young people leaving custody are navigating one of the most vulnerable moments in their lives. Delays or uncertainty in placement can lead to lost housing opportunities, gaps in care, or disengagement from support.

If judicial review moves forward, implementation should prioritize:

- Minimizing delays in placement
- Centering youth voice in decision-making
- Protecting placement availability in a rural system with limited beds
- Ensuring courts and providers have adequate resources to implement the process

The goal should always be stability.

Closing

Across these sections, the core issue is alignment between policy and reality.

Section 4 recognizes that some young people are already living independently and removes barriers that keep them locked out of care. That is an important step forward.

As we move in that direction, we also have an opportunity to make sure the systems around youth are ready to support them well. Expanding access will likely mean more young people seeking help, and it will be important that developmentally appropriate housing and supports are available when they do.

At Elevate Youth Services, we often say that belonging is the most powerful form of prevention. When young people have safe places to land and consistent adults in their lives, outcomes change.

Policies like this move us closer to that vision. Pairing them with the right infrastructure will help ensure they work as intended for the young people they are meant to support.

No young person should be brave enough to ask for help and then discover there is nowhere safe for them to go.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to Vermont's young people. I'm happy to answer any questions.