

3-10-2026

To: The Committee on Human Services

From: Trisha Wright, Nicole Aversano Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union

RE: Support of H.657

Dear Chair, Vice Chair and Members of the Committee,

Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

Our names are Trisha Wright and Nicole Aversano, and we serve as the Family Engagement Specialists at Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union. One of our primary roles is to help case manage students and families who qualify under the McKinney-Vento Act, meaning they are experiencing homelessness or housing instability. Currently at SVSU we are serving over 27 actively enrolled unaccompanied youth within our district. Twenty students are served at the high school level and unfortunately we even have some students as young as elementary level who are unaccompanied at this time.

McKinney Vento defines an unaccompanied youth as: “a child or youth experiencing homelessness who is not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.”

For unaccompanied youth, barriers show up in places most of us never think about. Accessing medical care, dental care, mental health services, medical insurance, opening a bank account, accessing housing or shelter, obtaining identification cards such as non driver’s id and learner’s permits and driver’s licenses. Here in Bennington County we have established a collaborative task force to help educate and advocate in hopes to enact some change in our community for this vulnerable population of youth.

Securing employment can also become cumbersome when students don’t have access to personal documentation such as birth certificates and social security cards. These documents are typically required to gain employment. And yet, these students often need employment in order to support themselves. More often than not, these students are paying for food, transportation, clothing, and even a place to stay and without access to their documents, even the simple act of trying to work and become more stable becomes another barrier placed in front of them.

With student permission, I would like to share the story of an unaccompanied youth I support and the systemic barriers they have recently faced.

If I had to describe the unaccompanied youth I work with in a single word, it would be resilient, and this student is truly the embodiment of that trait. We first met during the 2024–2025 school year after they were referred to me due to their living situation. Having lost their mother and primary caregiver at a young age, the student spent years moving between relatives before landing in a volatile living situation with their father. By age fifteen, they were frequently kicked

out of the house during conflicts, left to figure out on their own where to sleep and how to get to school.

Despite these hardships, they continued to show up. They learned to advocate for themselves and built a network of trusted adults to help them navigate systems that are often inaccessible without a legal guardian.

An example of one of these barriers occurred when this student worked incredibly hard to pass their driver's license road test. Before even reaching that moment, they had already navigated the complicated process of enrolling in driver's education, worked with school staff to figure out how to pay for the required course, and secured access to a vehicle to take the test. After passing, they were issued a temporary paper copy of their license. However, they were never able to receive their actual driver's license because they no longer had access to the required documentation and could not obtain a guardian's signature. What should have been a proud milestone became a moment of loss for this teenager, as their guardian refused to sign the paperwork or provide a copy of their birth certificate.

Unfortunately, the student's temporary Junior Driver's License eventually expired, leaving them unable to drive for several months stripping away a form of independence they worked so hard to achieve. I'm happy to share, however, that the student will soon turn 18 and plans to retake the road test as an adult.

Imagine the message this sends to a young person: you can do the work, you can pass the test, and you can follow every rule and protocol, but because of a signature from an adult who is not present in your life, your progress is void!

Students like this exist in communities across Vermont. They are capable, determined, and working incredibly hard to build stable futures, but our systems often make that path harder than it needs to be.

H.657 is about removing unnecessary barriers and ensuring access to basic life necessities for a vulnerable population. Young people experiencing homelessness are already navigating responsibilities far beyond what any child should experience, especially unaccompanied youth navigating life without the support of a guardian. At the very least, our laws should not create additional obstacles for them to move forward and build a stable future.

When we pass policies like H.657, we are providing access to basic human rights. We are simply making sure that protections are put in place and resilience is not the only thing unaccompanied youth have to rely on.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Trisha Wright and Nicole Aversano
Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union

Trisha.wright@svsu.org

Naversano@svsu.org