

Testimony in Support of H. 91

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Joey Corcoran. I'm a resident of Burlington and a retired licensed mental health counselor. For the past three years I've been a member of VIA's Affordable Housing & Homelessness Committee. I've also been attending meetings of the Chittenden Co. Homeless Alliance. So I know that Burlington non-profits offering shelter for both families and individuals are consistently full and still there are unhoused people on the streets. Vermont needs more consistent emergency shelter. The Elmwood Community Shelter is full with a waiting list of about 300 people.

Such a long waiting list is an indication of the success and desirability of this emergency shelter or transitional housing first known as "the pods". The "pods" are the small individual housing units with the bare essentials but with a key essential for traumatized individuals: a door that gives them the safety and privacy absent in a congregate shelter. The Elmwood shelter fills another need: it's a low barrier shelter. People are not required to first be sober or engaged with mental or substance use disorder treatment in order to be accepted as residents. They are encouraged to engage in on site social services but it's not required for their stay. Staffing providing the necessary case management and services is what has contributed to Elmwood's success. It's a true Housing First model: housing with specialized services to support people with mental health and medical needs. It also provides a modicum of temporary stability unlike the changing dates and eligibility requirements of the motel program.

On Thanksgiving, I went to the encampments on Burlington's waterfront. It was cold. "Anybody home?" I called out. "I have some food." An older man with a neatly trimmed beard and glasses unzipped the door of the tent. "Who's there?" a nervous female voice cried out from within the tent. "A surprise," replied her partner who looked like he could be a UVM professor. I noticed a wheelchair and a walker outside their tent. I wondered to myself, does she have to be wheeled or use a walker over the bumpy ground to get to a portapotty on the bike path?

In my Buddhist faith, there's a tenet: "Do no harm". Surely we can do better in providing shelter for elderly, disabled people caught in the gap of state-provided shelter between mid-September and December 1. What a difference between this couple's situation and the community of people I saw at Elmwood gathered in the shared resource center who were being treated like human beings. This bill addresses a critical need for interim shelter until deeply affordable housing comes into existence. We need emergency shelter that is efficient and humane, and where there is not just shelter but supportive services. I hope this bill gets passed.

Thank you for taking the time to address the needs of vulnerable Vermonters.