



groundworks  
COLLABORATIVE

## Testimony to House Human Services Committee on Behalf of Groundworks Collaborative

Jon Hoover, Assistant Executive Director

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Jon Hoover and I'm the Assistant Executive Director of Groundworks Collaborative. Groundworks Collaborative, based out of Brattleboro, works with people and systems to create solutions to end hunger and homelessness for all people in our region. Amongst other programs, we operate a 34 bed shelter that, given the current need and weather, currently serves 40 to 46 people each night. Additionally we provide outreach and case management to homeless households that are unsheltered or in the motel program. Lastly, we have under development a 40 bed shelter that is expected to open in the summer of 2026.

First, I want to commend the legislature for taking up this critical issue. The severity of Vermont's housing crisis demands thoughtful, systematic changes to our emergency shelter system, and this bill represents an important step toward creating more consistent, long-term solutions.

There are several elements of H.91 that represent significant improvements to our current system. The establishment of clear appeal rights and processes will better protect our most vulnerable neighbors. The winter shelter provisions from November to April provide critical life-saving protection during Vermont's harshest months. The bill's emphasis on community-based shelter over motels creates opportunities for more effective service delivery and support. The creation of an Advisory Committee including people with lived experience of homelessness will ensure that future policy decisions are informed by those most directly affected.

However, I must raise several concerns about key Task Force recommendations that weren't included in the current bill. The decision to maintain fixed duration limits of 45 or 90 days, rather than supporting people until they secure housing, will create new cycles of instability. Moreover, it plainly will undermine the stated legislative intent in the bill. I'm also particularly concerned about the bill's silence on resource testing requirements. The Task Force specifically recommended removing resource tests entirely, recognizing that anyone experiencing homelessness needs immediate support and that requiring people to spend down savings before receiving assistance can create barriers to long-term stability. I strongly encourage the committee to explicitly address resource testing in the bill's language rather than leaving this critical decision to departmental rulemaking.

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Speaking to the specific impact on Groundworks Collaborative, our primary concern centers on the increased demands for Coordinated Entry and case management services. While we support the goal of better service coordination, implementing these requirements effectively will require significant additional resources. Our current system is already stretched thin, and the mandatory case management requirements after 14 days will require substantial new capacity.

While funding mechanisms fall outside the scope of H.91, I urge the legislature to consider these crucial funding needs in tandem through the appropriations process. Last fall, OEO surveyed Coordinated Entry providers and the costs to expand capacity throughout the state was slightly over \$1 Million. Unfortunately, only a quarter of applicable funds were able to be obtained from HUD through the Balance of State's application. The full funding of expanded Coordinated Entry positions throughout the state by backfilling and matching HUD grants is critical to the success of this new system. Additionally, I strongly encourage the consideration of two-year contracts between AHS and service providers. This longer contractual timeline would allow organizations like Groundworks to better plan for capacity changes and maintain stable staffing levels.

At Groundworks, we're currently piloting the PSHA Medicaid funding mechanism for Housing Case Management. While this innovative approach shows promise, it's important to understand that it's a complex contracting mechanism that differs significantly from traditional grants. The administrative requirements are substantial, and the billing structure can create cash flow challenges for organizations.

While we support expanding this program, we must stress the importance of also maintaining and increasing funding for case management services through the HOP grant. These funding streams serve different purposes and populations. The Medicaid mechanism, while valuable, cannot replace the flexibility and accessibility of grant-funded services. Many of our clients face barriers to Medicaid enrollment and the HOP grant allows us to provide immediate, flexible support and is more accessible to a wide variety of organizations.

In Brattleboro, we're seeing firsthand how these various funding mechanisms interact and where gaps remain. When inadequate funding forces us to turn people away, when resource testing depletes their savings, or when case management capacity is stretched too thin, we see the ripple effects throughout our community. Each barrier to immediate assistance not only creates unnecessary human suffering but also impacts our broader community - from increased strain on emergency services to challenges for local businesses and public spaces.

Our experience suggests that a combination of stable, predictable funding sources - each with their own strengths - provides the most comprehensive support for our neighbors experiencing



homelessness while also benefiting the wider community. Getting this right means thinking holistically about both emergency response and long-term solutions.

I would be happy to answer any questions about our experience implementing these various funding mechanisms or about the direct impacts we're seeing on the ground in Brattleboro. Thank you for your time and consideration of these important issues.