



Testimony for the House Human Services Committee

Linda Anderson, Capstone Community Action - Director of Family & Community Support Services

February 13, 2025

Dear members of the House Human Services Committee,

For the record, my name is Linda Anderson. I am the Director of Family and Community Support Services for Capstone Community Action. I have worked with our Housing Program for the last 13 years. I want to thank you for allowing us to share with you some of the impacts our Housing Services have on community members' ability to access and maintain affordable housing, and why these services are important. Housing and homelessness prevention services prevent people from becoming unhoused, and if they do lose their housing, these services re-house them more quickly.

As you have heard, VCAP's request at the General Assembly this year includes sustaining case management positions and services funded to date by ERAP dollars. Without legislative action, these positions will disappear after June 30th – I will also share what a loss of these services would look like.

Our experience is that that no one solution will resolve the housing crisis. Our community members come to us with a wide variety of experiences, strengths, barriers and needs including underemployment, fixed incomes due to disability or age, and significant health barriers, among others. We do our best to provide holistic services, knowing that many areas of a person's life impact their housing stability.

Our housing services work, and we have the data to prove it! According to current data, between July 1, 2024 and February 11, 2025 we have served 402 households representing 762 people (this includes coordinated Entry Assessments, Housing Counseling and Emergency Scatter Site services). Of those 247 households (representing 441 people) engaged in housing counseling. 40 households (representing 74 people) obtained safe and affordable housing, and 43 households (representing 98 people) avoided eviction. This is 171 people who are not unhoused today because of these services.

While we celebrate every success, they are a drop in the bucket compared to the amount of need in our communities. For more information about services and outcomes you can review the graphs provided at the end of my testimony. They provide comparisons of people served and outcomes achieved over the past 5 years - from July 1, 2019 through June 30, 2024.

Housing counseling services help people navigate the housing system to achieve stability by addressing barriers to housing including, budget coaching, identifying barriers, goal setting and identifying action steps to meet those goals, as well as helping people access funds to get into housing. Folks in the Emergency Scatter Site family shelter program receive intensive case management during their stay to address barriers, seek permanent housing options, and connect them to the necessary resources to maintain stability once they leave the program.

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We are the Coordinated Entry Lead Agency in Lamoille and Washington Counties and an Assessment Partner in Orange Windsor North. Over the years, our program has grown to include more robust housing supports adding housing retention services, which is ongoing medium term case management services (up to 24 months) to help people retain housing which can include work to address ongoing barriers to maintaining stable housing, coaching around tenancy skills, etc. We manage 9 Emergency Scattered Site units in Washington county providing family shelter. This is short-term shelter up to 3 months in a region with very limited family shelter options.

Service Challenges:

Our Housing Program doesn't exist in a vacuum. We rely heavily on our community partners to meet people's needs. Our focus is primarily long-term housing solutions, but people need safe spaces to experience homelessness to be able to engage in our services. The state's shelter system, including traditional shelters and the GA Emergency Housing program, work hard to keep people out of the elements. Unfortunately – they aren't adequately resourced to meet the needs – whether through insufficient infrastructure or not enough people in the state able to work 2nd and 3rd shift for shelter staffing it's been a struggle to increase shelter capacity. We see rural areas struggle not having critical mass to sustain shelter services and few, sometimes no hotels, that work with GA. Often our participants are so deeply ingrained in these rural communities with children in schools, access to their health care providers, employment, childcare and other natural supports, that they can't afford to access the shelter services that do exist. People who are living outside often struggle to stay in touch and don't have the capacity to focus on the longer-range plans to get into permanent housing, having to focus entirely on survival from one moment to the next.

While service providers have come together at the local level through housing coalitions to create systems around Coordinated Entry – the services aren't sufficiently resourced. Some states use their HMIS system to provide live time shelter information and facilitate referrals to those beds. Without this capacity our participants and staff are stuck calling around to various providers, often finding there are waitlists, or waiting on hold to try to apply for Emergency Housing.

The ability to provide ongoing support to households has been an important addition to our case management services, but the complexity around the funding continues to be a barrier. An example of this is funding for retention case management to people who were previously literally homeless. With our main funding source (Housing Opportunity Program grant) – we can provide up to 2 years of retention services to households that were identified as at risk of homelessness, but only up to 3 months of services for households that were identified as literally homeless. The funding available for longer term case management is only available if the household has ongoing rental assistance. Many of our participants don't have subsidies or if they are able to get a voucher, are unable to find an appropriate unit so they can use the voucher. Currently, ERAP funding allows us to fill that service gap, but that only lasts through June of 2025. This will be one of the major losses we'll face if ERAP funding isn't replaced with something that provides similar flexibility. As of right now, we will lose one full-time navigation

position and one full-time retention position. We will also see a gap in funding for two housing counseling positions partially funded through ERAP. Loss of those funds could make those positions unsustainable.

Opportunities for greater success:

Things that we have seen help achieve positive outcomes for our participants include flexibility in direct client assistance. These funds are an important tool to help people overcome barriers. We often find something as small as a \$15 - \$60 fee for a birth certificate or other form of ID can completely derail a person's forward momentum.

The Landlord Liaison role in our Lamoille office, has been critical to our successes. The Landlord Liaison can serve as a bridge between landlords and tenants and help build relationships with landlords to help them feel comfortable taking a chance. Unfortunately, our Landlord Liaison recently resigned and with the loss of ERAP funding slated for June 2025 we are unable to re-fill this position.

We need more affordable units, more appropriate housing options for our community members who need supported housing models, sober housing options, increased shelter capacity in the form of non-congregate shelter with sufficient staffing, and more funding for supportive services. This could include Peer Coaching, which could have the potential to fill some of the gaps we see in funding retention work for formerly homeless households.

An example of the importance of our work is seen in the recent success of a community member finding housing after spending months sleeping outside. This person suffered the loss of a child. That loss led to struggles with mental health, loss of employment and eventually loss of housing. They came to us and our housing counselor was able to provide a safe space for the person to identify their barriers to housing and work to overcome them. They live in a rural area with little to no shelter options and leaving the area would have meant they wouldn't easily be able to see their other children as they didn't have transportation. The housing counselor helped them connect to mental health care and apply for housing. With our support they found employment and after several months of working together and an apartment falling through, the participant finally signed a lease and moved into their new apartment early in the new year. This created stability for this individual to support their ongoing employment and have access to their children. Working with our housing counselor also potentially helped save this person's life as there were several times during the process where they indicated they just wanted to give up. Living outside in the winter weather was getting to be too much for them.

Our Housing Counseling program doesn't work for everyone, but for many, our staff are a lifeline. They're there to encourage people to keep going even when it's hard. They help them access the little things that get in the way of stable housing like IDs and connect them with what sometimes end up being life sustaining supports like mental health, substance use services, basic needs like food and health care. It's more than just having enough money to pay the rent. It's helping people see the big picture – envision what's possible, and work toward making

those dreams of safe, secure housing a reality. Staff also play an important role as liaison between our clients and landlords supporting successful tenancy.

Thank you for your time.

**Capstone Community Action Housing Services and Outcomes Data Comparisons
July 1, 2019 – June 30, 2024**

