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Testimony to the Vermont House Human Services Committee on H.91,

Emergency Temporary Shelter Program

Provided on February 19, 2025

Thank you, Chair Teresa Wood and members of the Human Services Committee. and special greetings to our good friend, Representative Esme Cole from Hartford. My name is Michael Redmond and I'm the Executive Director of the Upper Valley Haven located in Hartford. I am Treasurer of the Housing & Homelessness Alliance of Vermont and serve on its Steering Committee.

I appreciate the opportunity to comment on H91 which proposes to establish the Emergency Temporary Shelter Program to replace the General Assistance Housing Program as well as offer other thoughts about how Vermont should respond to the number of Vermonters who are without homes.

The Upper Valley Haven was founded 45 years ago by concerned people in White River Junction, motivated by their religious faith and a desire to put that faith into concrete action, to help their neighbors who had no place to sleep. From that inspiring origin story the Upper Valley Haven continues its focus on providing shelter to the unhoused which helps save lives and helping them find housing where they can begin to lead self-determined lives. We currently operate a shelter for adults, a shelter for families and a winter shelter in Lebanon across the river in New Hampshire that is partially funded by Vermont to support Vermonters who have found shelter there this especially cold winter.

I'm also pleased to report that the Haven plans to break ground this spring on a 20-bed year-round low-barrier shelter and resource center that will open next year to provide essential shelter and day programming to connect people to needed services and permanent housing. The path to approval of this shelter in Hartford, which had previously been denied by the Zoning Board, was greatly assisted by the passage of the HOME Act of 2023 which included emergency shelters in the list of uses that restricted the actions of municipalities. I offer my deepest gratitude.

In addition to our shelter programs, the Haven also provides community outreach services focused on helping people obtain and keep housing. This includes staff who focus on those who

are receiving emergency shelter through the existing General Assistance Emergency Housing Program.

Today, I will offer some comments regarding the language and provisions of H91 as well as some thoughts regarding how we move forward with not only focusing on shelter, but actually reducing the number of people who are unhoused in Vermont.

First to H91. I applaud the overall goal to eliminate unsheltered homelessness and interim shelter opportunities provide a stable pathway to permanent housing. Given the focus of this bill, it does provide a solid approach to the first part of this goal, even if it requires more attention and resources on the second part to achieve the goal of reducing homelessness.

I welcome the addition of an Advisory Group to the Commissioner composed of people with lived experience and expertise of homelessness. I asked Chelsea, the staff person at the Haven who provides supportive services to people in the GA Emergency Housing program temporarily living in motels, what she thought of this idea. She told me she could think of several people she works with who would be great in this role as representatives from the Hartford District, but she warned the Commissioner might not be ready to deal with everything they would advise him to do.

We agree with a “shelter first” approach for most of the people we work with. But there are many for whom congregate shelters, the style used by most organizations, even when there is some level of privacy would not be appropriate due to their physical health conditions and significant risk to the consequences of infection, people with trauma-histories staying in shelters, mental health conditions such as schizophrenia and other valid reasons why this would be unsuccessful and risky for many. We also agree with ideas that will keep people sheltered in their home areas where their community resources exist.

Regarding the contracting with motels, we are pleased that there is language that speaks to health standards and fire and building safety through licensing and code adherence. We can hope that these standards and practices would make a significant difference in what we experience today. Perhaps the practice of withholding of payment is one remedy that could result in compliance with these health and safety standards. We can only hope that through these rules the standards in the motels accepted into the new Emergency Temporary Shelter Program would result in more livable conditions. It would seem that this should be the minimum the State should accept.

The shelters we operate are subject to rigorous habitability standards of functioning equipment, sanitary spaces, safety protocols, healthy environments. A new program using motels for temporary shelter should settle for nothing less. This would include regular cleaning, standard supplies in rooms, equipment that is repaired promptly, spaces free of vermin. This can only be accomplished through consistent and frequent inspections.

Regarding eligibility, we are disappointed that the State continues to limit eligibility during non-winter months to certain categories of people leaving out many others between the ages of 20 and 60 who need shelter. We are pleased that the winter program does not include these criteria recognizing the dangers of living outside in extreme weather conditions. We would point out that increasingly these conditions exist in the summer as well.

We are disappointed that the bill continues to limit the number of days during the non-winter months that a household can receive shelter through the new motel program. I would point out that no limits exist in the shelter program as there's a recognition that the tight housing market and unaffordable rents are the reasons that a household is unhoused and these are out of the control of any individual household.

We support the requirement of participation in the coordinated entry program. It is our practice in the outreach program we now provide in the motels to enroll everyone in coordinated entry with an assessment of the household characteristics and needs and care planning. We would encourage further cooperation between Economic Services and the local service providers and provision of more information to guests using the motels such as written reports on their remaining days of eligibility and other information of value. Rigorous monthly reporting, as outlined in the bill, is essential to measure progress and challenges in the program.

Here are some other thoughts that would seem relevant to the broad goals outlined in this proposed legislation and that are consistent with the recommendations of the GA Emergency Task Force.

- On March 15 almost 500 households will lose their eligibility for the Emergency Housing program as the Winter season ends. Vermont has no plan or capacity to shelter these vulnerable Vermonters. This program should be extended to June 30.
- HOP grants for shelter operations from OEO provide no support for project supervision and management and only a nominal amount for administration and overhead. The full cost of project should be supported in these grants.
- The services provided to the households receiving emergency housing in the motels through the community outreach program funded by HOP grants needs to continue. It provides an essential lifeline to these households to help them with housing navigation, access to essential records, facilitating connections to insurance and health providers, emergency food and funding and other services. Through this work Chelsea and the Haven team have helped 9 households achieve permanent housing over the past year.
- As the COVID-era ERAP funds wind down this fiscal year, the services provided by staff funded through this program need to be replaced through state-funded support.
- Vermont's housing and homelessness crisis will take sustained long-term investments to fully solve. Actions that will increase the supply of affordable housing are essential to reducing the number of people who are unhoused.

- Shelter guests are increasingly arriving with significant chronic and acute health conditions. With an average age of new guests of 50 years, guests also have conditions associated with diseases of aging. Personal care, mental health, substance misuse, medication management and other physical ailments are routine and shelters were never designed to manage this complexity. We are left to our own initiatives and resources to address these problems. We recommend that the health systems of Vermont under the direction of the Agency for Human Services and others be directed to focus on this problem and work with shelter providers to devise effective coordination of care and solutions.