

Good afternoon. My name is Sarah Launderville and I'm the executive director of the Vermont Center for Independent Living. VCIL is a statewide nonprofit organization of people with disabilities working together for dignity, independence and civil rights.

Just a quick overview of VCIL: The majority of our staff and board are people with disabilities. We use that lived experience to support people in the community with disabilities and support them on their goals of independence. When we talk about independence it's not about a place to live or being on our own, but about being able as people with disabilities to make our own choices, and have the opportunity to work and live in the world. We serve people with all different types of disabilities.

We do this through peer advocacy counseling, provide home modifications and assistive technology, manage a Meals on Wheels program for people with disabilities under the age of sixty, and provide technical support to the business community. We have many different programs listed on our website [www.vcil.org](http://www.vcil.org).

Over the past few years, VCIL has taken a very serious interest in people experiencing homelessness. This especially became a focus when the Governor made the announcement to end the public health emergency. What we found at VCIL is that while the public health emergency funding and policies had ended and many people had moved on from the pandemic, our peers, people with disabilities in the state were still and are still at higher risk and they were caught within a system that was no longer helping them as a priority.

Our peers are suffering and we want to approach this as offering suggestions in which we think the programs can change to alleviate some of that suffering. I might boldly suggest that you ask others what their lens is when looking at these programs. Is it a program within a certain restrictive budget, a program that serves only some people, a program that has never been fully developed as one and they have to work day to day in it even though they might offer suggestions to alleviate that suffering if only they could speak freely about it and not take a side or a corner, or at least be honest about that lens right from the beginning.

I for years thought that everyone comes to the table because we care and want to serve the people screaming for help- but have come to realize that bias plays a large role and we're not all on the same page.

So having said all that – my bias and lens and expertise is around supporting people with disabilities. I am sitting before you with a forward moving spirit. Excited for the creation of something that benefits and protects people.

I work a bit with the truth and reconciliation commission which was set up by our legislature to look deeply into the harms we've created as a system. Sometimes those harms were created intentionally like the eugenics movement and sometimes those harms are created from a place of "we're just trying to help". I see that all the time. A great example is when the flooding happened in 2023 and systems were set up mostly by able-bodied people who "were just trying to help" in an emergency and would leave people with disabilities and their experiences right out of the conversation and set up systems of volunteers that "were just trying to help" but didn't know the first thing about supporting people with disabilities and it actually created harm.

We have a great opportunity here and I appreciate the work of all who continue to engage while at the same time are dealing with

drinking from the firehose of a state of emergency, we are all living in.

I also want to share our support for an advisory board comprised of people with lived experience and also caution some of our experiences with such committees to help with pitfalls of unintended consequences.

I appreciate the committee asking for a report from a task force and included our organization in that task force. I believe that made it possible to get to the heart of some of the existing structural issues. It's disappointing to me that the department's letter to this committee makes it seem like the people with lived experience and advocates approach doesn't consider the financial constraints of the state. I followed some of that committee and our representative to the task force, Brenda Siegel, reported back and I think the task force did exactly what they were asked to do, within the constraints of what they were offered. I think that they did a really incredible job with a huge task and a strong diversity of voices.

When I'm looking at program development I start with the actual needs and build from there- what are the issues and how can we address them and instead of coming to the table with an approach of working together there is a dissention to every recommendation that involves more analysis and an attitude that it can't be done because of funding. That is an approach that hinders evolving into something that works for people when they are needing support more than ever.

I can tell you how it's affecting our programmatic work at VCIL. More and more individuals who are experiencing homelessness are seeking support from our peer counseling team. What has taken the most time and support is every time there is a change to the program but not adequate and plain language information to the peers and without the support of us and in turn partners we've found in End Homelessness Vermont and Pathways

Vermont, these people would have been left on the street. There have been multiple transitions in which End Homelessness Vermont, literally had to be the nearly sole communicator with people in hotels, and where they have had to work day and night to help people jump several hurdles.

It does seem that there is a lack of understanding of disability for people experiencing homelessness. Examples like prioritization, making people re do a Disability Variance Form every year. Those things have made providers and people with disabilities spend so much time trying to constantly meet higher and higher hurdles and lose their shelter as a result. The people come to us because they have no other support and as I'm sure you've heard in testimony don't feel supported by the existing systems.

When I hear that staff are running around the state to help people who are Hard of Hearing be able to meet a deadline to pay their income contribution or explain the newest rule that is a waste of resources. VCIL staff are there to support independence and we've basically become an extension of what this program should be doing.

But it wasn't really built as a program and that's the issue from where we sit. When building programs we need to think on all the levels of protection. It's got to be baked in and that's what the recommendations have done and until the mess is cleared we need to stop harming the participants. We can't have them jumping through unnecessary hoops just because we don't have clear paths for them. That creates more chaos and for our peers who have disabilities an absolute roadblock that good programs have responsibilities to deal with.

There are laws that are being broken right now – the Americans with Disabilities Act specifically and all the system work needs to ensure that we're not creating more chaos for individuals. Now, I work with people with disabilities but care about all the people experiencing homelessness and I wouldn't want to say one "category" is more important than another- but I do find it

upsetting that when prioritizing - people with disabilities seem to end up off that list. And, I have to wonder if it's because it's just easier to discard that population overall because they don't have the same resources or bandwidth to keep up with ever changing rules and understand what all the rules mean.

We need to be thoughtful from start to finish and including the evaluation stage of how this helps support someone in crisis.

This must be done in parallel action. As this continues to be worked on and strengthened we cannot pull the people experiencing homelessness into the push and pull of that system change again. We need to pause changes so that people remain sheltered until they are permanently housed, programmatic structure is put in place, we can't allow what happened last fall to ever happen again. We know firsthand how the changes over the past few years have affected our ability to support individuals in the community.

Our capacity to continue to support is so thin right now and while we try so hard with our very small, statewide staff we know that sometimes that support is the actual lifeline of an individual- including people released from hospital with a new amputation, people with developmental disabilities and Deaf not understanding the programmatic language and our staff trying to keep up with the changing rules.

We've had an interest in the definition of disability and we continue to support language that comes in line with the federal definition of disability that is widely known and accepted under the Americans with Disabilities Act which passed in 1990. Getting to that program assessment of verification, we continue to believe that there are ways to do this and not create large barriers for individuals. We support the recommendations of the task force.

There is language in the recommendations regarding complying with the Olmstead decision, which is a legal decision upholding

the integration mandate of the Americans with Disabilities Act basically saying that people with disabilities should be able to live in the least restrictive environment that they choose. So, if we're offering programming around shelter systems and we start to put people with disabilities in more restrictive environments like nursing homes or other institutions just because they have a disability that becomes a violation of the ADA. It's about options and choice. So, as we are developing alternative options that needs to really in the forefront of the discussions and decision making. I would add to this that in any consideration of specialized shelter, it is critical that it not be siloing one population from another, that has remnants of asylums and institutions. Removing people with complex needs and living with disabilities from the general population is a slippery slope.

I recommend the focus be on support in permanent housing, with robust access to services and some beds set aside for these specific needs, but not entire isolating shelters. That carries a big risk of going back in the wrong direction.

One recommendation that would be something to put in place sooner rather than later and would help us in supporting individuals in the community is around information sharing, and communication. VCIL staff spend a good amount of time working to help individuals understand their rights and responsibilities. The recommendations around clearly defining and having plain language in determination notices, the application process, the process for asking for a Reasonable Accommodation (which by law cannot be denied because the way some asked was not exactly perfect according to such process, as you heard from legal aid this morning), and the appeals process. Providing details and information in writing to all households, including issuing denial letters when someone has been denied and including the reason for the denial, instructions on the appeal process and contact information for legal services and other organizations who can support them through an appeal, there is only one other organization, to my knowledge, that offers that type of support to people who are not currently their clients, so offering those two

resources would not be a huge administrative burden. Having different options for applying allows for people to be successful in getting the supports they need efficiently, making sure that people know what resources are available to them is critical to them getting the support they need.

We need and agree with the recommendations of robust data collection so that we can create and continue to move in the right direction of supporting individuals. The reporting requirements recommended by the task force are important to help understand. The department has said in the report that they have a hard time collecting certain data and I think looking to partners who have developed relationships with the participants by supporting them holistically not just in the emergency program might get us to some of that information too. Some partners are doing that work already and it's not funded.

We believe that housing first models for housing and principles for shelter, as well as coordinated entry are important to the success of individuals moving from emergency shelter programs to permanent housing.

There are many people working to support people in the community and for VCIL we've relied on End Homelessness Vermont in essentially a role as ombudsman, supporting our staff, and working together to support individuals and without that support we know that eligible applicants would have not received the support that they should have. That's what's pretty heartbreaking that we know there are people who would have and did lose shelter until someone advocated and got the right information to help them stay sheltered. That's not programming to be proud of. We believe that this Ombudsman Role needs to become an essential part of the infrastructure to help support individuals and also report back to the Legislature and ensure that we are being accountable to the systems being developed.

We know that a housing first model and the work of Pathways Vermont is critical in this overall and partnerships. We would like

to be able to refer to them more, but they are limited and need robust and statewide funding.

We will continue to provide service/support peer support role but like other organizations our funding is at risk as much of it comes from the federal government.

These are the specific recommendations that we would like to make to this committee:

1. We support the task force recommendations and specifically want to highlight the need to have no room or day caps as this is extremely harmful and causes pressure and chaos on our systems and most importantly for people experiencing homelessness.
2. Use the task force's recommendation and the ADA's definition of disability AND language of requirements around reasonable accommodation that you heard from legal aid today.
3. I appreciate the many options that the task force created for proving a disability. We have found the disability variance form to be the most accessible option, but a variety of options is good for our community.
4. That statutory language be added that requires reasonable accommodations be considered, I have included two recommendations that our representative in the task force did present, but there was not time to fully consider. In the interest of time, I will not go over them today, but, will include them. One is already in rules, but, is not being followed. The second is clarifying language for a reasonable accommodation. I think we need to put to rest these extra barriers for people with disabilities and the work required of providers.
5. In any specialty shelter discussion to ensure that these are mixed population and include choice for people living with disabilities. Being careful not to create isolating or forced quasi-institutional environments.



6. Use Housing First models to ensure that people do not become unsheltered. Offering robustly available, but not required services.

I am so grateful for the work of this committee.