



90 Prospect Street, St. Johnsbury VT

House Committee on Human Services

October 30, 2025

Hello, I am Jenna O'Farrell, Executive Director of Northeast Kingdom Community Action, or NEKCA – serving Caledonia, Essex and Orleans Counties. I serve as the President of the Vermont Community Action Partnership which consists of SEVCA, BROCC, CVOEO and Capstone. Together we cover every county in Vermont and provide support, services, and programs to our low-income and vulnerable community members.

Thank you for inviting me to provide testimony today as a community shelter provider and our ability to meet current needs. NEKCA operates a 20-bed shelter in St. Johnsbury that is currently full with a wait list. Along with the support of RuralEdge, the Shelter at Moose River opened in January of 2024. We are moving towards an expansion of another 20 beds with the support of OEO and VHCB. The Shelter at Moose River is considered a low-barrier shelter. Our low-barrier shelter minimizes requirements for entry to make services more accessible. Instead of demanding sobriety, identification, or income verification, our shelter focuses on providing immediate help with minimal rules, often allowing people to stay even if they are under the influence of substances. We have rules against bringing in drugs or alcohol. We establish a culture of compassion and prioritize safety. The goal is to meet people where they are and reduce barriers to accessing support. Our job is to keep the environment safe, and the guest's job is to help us keep it safe.

Additionally, we operate a micro-shelter for 4 women who are transitioning from homelessness. They have authored and are actively engaged in a housing plan to obtain and sustain safe, affordable, permanent housing. This shelter is not maintained with full-time staffing. We have a staff who has formed relationships with each participant and does daily check-ins.

One of our core values at NEKCA is relationships. Our staff provide an array of services both in and out of the shelter that center on building trust and assisting participants in getting their needs met. We provide and coordinate financial coaching, job training, access to health care, and treatment. In our community action agency, not only do we provide wrap around services at the shelter; but we also meet with individuals experiencing homelessness in street encampments, in our food shelves, and in our drop-in housing departments.

Not everyone chooses to come into our shelter. We have a 27-year-old community member who struggles with addiction – I'll refer to him as Collin. Collin met our housing advocates in his

encampment. He clearly expressed that he was not willing to go in a shelter at this time due to his substance use. On many visits, staff invited Collin to come into our agency at any time. One day, Collin took us up on the offer. He regularly stops in now for warmth, food, clothes, hygiene items but that's not what keeps him coming – it's the relationship he has formed with the staff. Collin has fractured relationships with family and friends. He has found acceptance from our staff and has been able to form and sustain appropriate connections. They consistently present him with options with the hope that one day he will recognize himself on another path. At Community Action, we care for the entire community and help people help themselves and one another; we ensure that no one is left to face their struggles alone.

From July 2024 to June 2025, The Shelter at Moose River had 15 people exit to permanent housing and 12 temporary housing. These are considered successful outcomes. NEKCA supervises and holds a master lease on 37 beds in 10 shelter apartments throughout the Northeast Kingdom. At times, when available, we are able to provide a continuum of housing support and options to assist people out of homelessness.

Additionally, during this same reporting period, 22 individuals returned to homelessness after a shelter stay. Four exits included people who were hospitalized due to chronic illness and 1 incarceration. The main reason for negative exits are recorded as substance related.

As a Community Action Agency, we are always willing to partner with local and state agencies to meet community needs. NEKCA was awarded a grant from the Opioid Settlement Funds to partner with our NEK recovery centers to hire and train 4 peer-housing coaches to specifically work with those who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness due to substance use. We have not received a grant agreement currently or communication from the state regarding the status of the award.

Today, there are 53 hotel rooms being utilized by the state of Vermont in the Northeast Kingdom for 16 children and 67 adults. 10 of the rooms are occupied by people who are from outside of Caledonia, Essex, and Orleans counties. According to our Coordinated Entry list, 86 are currently considered street homeless, not in shelter or the hotel program.

Now, our homeless community members are faced with another challenge around receiving SNAP benefits. We are appreciative of the Governor's leadership in preserving the benefit during this time of uncertainty. I believe this is worth mentioning because those who are experiencing homelessness are also considered food insecure. Our staff assist participants with completing forms and receiving benefits. At the Shelter at Moose River, participants use the SNAP benefits to buy food that they are able to prepare and share. Our staff engage in this process as mentors – modeling shopping habits, assisting in meal preparation, promoting nutritional options, and budgeting. The autonomy of being able to purchase their own food gives participants a sense of ownership and the ability to care for others. Our HOP shelter food budget only allows us to spend \$4.00 per day per guest. We all rely on the SNAP benefits to feed the most vulnerable members of our community. We also have strong partnerships with our local high school,

restaurants, and community groups who regularly donate food. When we experience an abundance, our guests at the Shelter have organized a system to package meals and deliver them to the unsheltered community.

We are thankful for the community support we receive. At Community Action we change people's lives, we embody the spirit of hope, improve communities and make our communities better places to live.