

Good afternoon members of the committee and thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Alexa Taschereau. I am the supported housing case manager at Spectrum Youth and Family Services. My role is to provide one-on-one weekly case management to transition aged youth, sometimes as young as 16 to 24 years old in our mid-barrier shelter and rapid rehousing programs.

Our shelter, the Landing, has 4 double bed rooms for a total of 8 clients in communal living while our rapid rehousing project, The Pearl Street Residence, has 8 single occupancy bedroom leases with a shared communal area. Previously, youth at the Pearl Street Residence could obtain a section 8 voucher at the end of their 1-year lease. However, due to changes on the federal level, this is no longer the case.

Though my role as case manager is primarily focused on navigating complex housing systems, much of my time is spent working with young people to teach them the independent living skills needed to ensure that any housing they do find is successful. We cover topics you may expect from budgeting to cooking or learning how to drive, and others that may surprise you such as how to operate a washing machine, how to call a doctor's office, how to wash their hair, or how to appeal a 3Squares decision because homelessness is no longer a qualifier for benefits.

Over the past two years, the average length of stay at The Landing was 8 months. Currently, half of the youth in that program have been involved in Spectrum supported housing for over a year with many of them having spent months at our Nightly Emergency shelter prior to their bed becoming available. That is more than half a year of living in a

room with no door and a randomly assigned stranger in the bed next to theirs where they are woken up and asked to leave from 9am-5pm. But even this is better than where they came from, 18-year olds freshly out of foster care, young people kicked out or runaway from harmful families, fleeing domestic violence, or out of couches to crash on. Without Spectrum, their options would be an adult shelter with others, decades their senior, or the street. When this is how you enter the homeless system, it is almost impossible to get a good start.

Everyone deserves safe and stable housing, but for young people experiencing homelessness, the barriers are many and their age and experience put them at a unique disadvantage. The youth I work with are tasked with navigating education, employment, physical and mental healthcare, social development, and community resources all without knowing if they will have a place to call home and before their brain is even fully developed.

Many of these young people have spent their formative years trying to survive. They have little to no job history, some have no high school diploma, or cannot work due to untreated physical and mental illness. This makes it nearly impossible to get the resources ones needs, for example, for a security deposit and first month's rent. This past year, I worked with two young people who were able to each sign leases for studio apartments. 230 sq. ft at \$998 a month, heat and electric not included, nor the price of internet they need to finish their online high school diplomas while working 30 hours a week and being active members in their faith communities. This equates to about half of their incomes, not including the cost of furniture, transportation, and food. Luckily the Champlain Valley

Office of Economic Opportunity was able to pay their security deposits, but that money is not always available.

Even when the money is available, the young people I serve have no rental history, no credit history and no time to build either before aging out of youth homeless services into adult services that assume they have the wherewithal to independently navigate systems so complex I am paid to know them. They must compete against college students with parent's cosigning while they do not even have an emergency contact to alert when they are sitting in the ER for hours waiting for an evaluation because they cannot stop thinking that they want to die. Spectrum can help 8 youth at a time build rental history in our rapid rehousing project and we can teach the fundamentals of credit building or refer to counseling, but we can never replace the support of an unpaid caring adult. Someone who would have taught them how to set boundaries or encouraged them to achieve their goals. My clients want to become marine biologists, paramedics, veterinarians, parents, and artists. But years of lost familial and social support breeds hopelessness. This is especially compounded as my clients see their childhood peers hit milestones, graduate, and thrive.

Spectrum is doing all we can to support these young people as they search for housing and search for themselves with counseling programs, mentoring, and case management. Without our amazing community partnerships, none of this would be possible. But what these young people need is stability, safety, and time that shelter cannot afford.

On behalf of myself and the young people I serve, I thank you again for your wiliness and interest in hearing their experience. Where they are often unheard, you are giving them a voice. Thank you.