Thank you for allowing us to testify today on H.397. My name is Paige Hartsell and I'm the Executive Director of KURRVE (Kingdom United Resilence and Recovery Effort) , the long-term disaster recovery group in the NEK. I have been in this position for two months and came to disaster recovery work from organizing in impacted communities in the NEK. Through my parents, I have a deep affinity to the land and people of this region and moved here permanently in June of 2023. Just two weeks later I found myself like many others grappling with the devastation that we were faced with. Realizing that there was no mass mobilization happening I got connected to NEKO and started helping where I could, beginning in Barton.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on H.397. My name is Sarah Henshaw and I am the Coordinator for the long-term recovery group in Lamoille County, affectionately known as LEARN. I'm also the co-Vice-Chair of the VT Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters. LeARN began after the 2023 flooding and has supported over 300 households impacted in both 2023 and 2024. We are a collaborative of the health and human services nonprofits serving Vermonters in Lamoille County. I will be speaking after Paige, providing specific recommendations on the current iteration of the bill from LTRGs.

PAIGE
KURRVE was formed in the wake of the 2023 floods through the collaborative efforts of NEK Prosper, NEKO, and other community partners who responded to the needs of the people impacted by this disaster in the NEK. In the flood that hit exactly one year later, on July 10, 2024, data showed that 39 of the 55 towns in the Kingdom had at least one call into 211. We know that throughout the more than 2000 square miles that covers our region, there were many others who did not call even though they suffered damage from the flood.

It is well known in disaster recovery work that recovery efforts implemented and carried out by local leaders have better outcomes for survivors. These collaborative efforts of recovery and mitigation to build back communities have better results simply because they are driven by those impacted in the very communities in which they live. This process should inform, from the bottom up, how the state moves forward in disaster recovery policy and in improving the Statewide Framework for Flood Preparedness, Response, and Recovery.

Twelve long-term recovery groups (LTRGs) exist throughout the state of Vermont, mostly formed in response to July 2023 flooding events. While intended to exist for the duration of the recovery period and to focus on supporting individuals and households by connecting them   to resources for housing recovery/ repairs, LTRGs also support community preparedness, more holistic recovery support – including personal property replacement, rental assistance for those in buyouts, mental health and healing support, and mitigating against future impacts of disaster events.

Without LTRGs, over 6,000 of our neighbors and fellow Vermonters would still be stuck in their recovery journeys. Buyout applications would be incomplete and not moving forward. Badly damaged housing would not be repaired, and people would be living in moldy, dangerous housing. Neighbors would not have tools and knowledge to prepare for future floods. The Vermont Community Foundation stepped in where the state did not and has provided critical philanthropic dollars for capacity building and staffing, bulk materials purchases for home repairs, funding for the build out of Monday.com, and more. It is difficult to imagine how this work with survivors could move forward without this support. Our experiences on the ground in communities that are reeling

from the impacts of more frequent and more devastating climate events demonstrates to us that the financial obligation of mitigation, response, and recovery must be intentionally held by the state. The need is enormous and VCF funds are dwindling rapidly.

With two years of back-to-back flooding events doubly impacting many of our neighbors, LTRGs have solidified their places in recovery. Recognizing the contribution and ongoing support we bring as we walk shoulder to shoulder with our communities, we are encouraged to see mention of LTRGs in the collaborative narrative outlined in this proposed legislation. However, H.397 misses clear opportunities to support LTRGs and more importantly Vermonters who are still struggling to recover and those that will be impacted by future events who don't have resources to recover.

SARAH
As Paige mentioned, LTRGs read the current iteration of H.397 and appreciated the mention of LTRGs as a collaborating partner for the state. It is with this appreciation in mind that we offer recommendations for your consideration based on our 2+ years working directly with flood impacted Vermonters. Many of our recommendations have been validated by the Community Resilience Organizations (CROS), a racial and environmental organizing hub.

- Our first recommendation focuses on the Needs Assessment laid out in Sec 8 of the current bill. We recommend augmenting the scope to include an assessment of the individual and household recovery system across the state. Information gathered should inform an individual assistance recovery policy - which doesn't currently exist. Without such a policy, individual recovery will languish in all future disasters, as there is no system, no funding, and no one responsible for supporting individuals in their recovery journey. FEMA estimates between 15-18% of the total number of damaged households in any disaster will have unmet recovery needs - meaning they won't have critical recovery resources to help them on their recovery journey. Without an individual assistance recovery policy and system, these Vermonters will be unable to recover from the disaster.

- Our second recommendation focuses on the sustainability of LTRGs. Currently LTRGs are self-funded with little to no state financial support, no mandate to be included in any municipal emergency management plan, and no coordinating framework. Through H.397, this committee has the opportunity to include mandates in the State Emergency Management Plan to link immediate relief (town emergency managers) to medium and long-term recovery (LTRGs or other recovery actors), creating an appropriate role for LTRGs in the state emergency management system. This committee also has the opportunity to consider small grants to LTRGs for operational stability – an annual $25,000 grant per LTRG could support staffing needed to ensure functioning between disaster events. Without funding, LTRGs will start to close down, leaving gaps in individual recovery systems, reducing community resilience.

- Our third recommendation focuses on the need for a common and consistent disaster data collection and utilization policy and system. Currently, the state has access to CrisisCleanUp for reporting damages and requesting volunteer support, requests Vermonters report damage through 211, and is supporting Monday.com for LTRGs to manage construction/ repair projects. With three different data streams, LTRGs and other entities providing recovery support have

lost cases, duplicated efforts, and/or not used resources efficiently. The state needs to choose a system to collect and disseminate data and create a policy on how disaster damage data is used in individual assistance recovery.

- Our fourth recommendation is to include a cabinet level position for the Division of Emergency Management to ensure that critical information and messaging to municipalities before, during, and after a climate event is cohesive and consistent through all sectors and informed by on-the-ground information that LTRGs and communities can offer.

- Our final recommendation focuses on two critical pieces of resilience and mitigation – breaking apart silos and planning along river corridors. The committee has the opportunity to include provisions that protect and expand existing floodplains and develop comprehensive strategies for the management of river corridors as part of the buyout program designed in the bill. The bill offers opportunity to examine overlaps between state housing plans, climate action plans, and recovery action plans to find synergies through the needs assessment mentioned in section 2.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these recommendations. We appreciate greatly that our leaders are considering ways to learn from two years of flooding and take action to build resilience across our state. We welcome the opportunity to answer questions, should you have any.