



Christina Brown
Chief Program Officer
Spectrum Youth & Family Services
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Hello and thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Christina Brown; I am the Chief Program Officer at Spectrum Youth and Family Services.

At Spectrum, we serve over 1300 youth each year, between the ages of 12 and 30 years old with services that focus on Prevention and Intervention, Life Skills, and Basic Needs. We provide crisis stabilization, employment coaching, outpatient mental health and substance use counseling, mentoring, affinity spaces, food and material resources, and housing stabilization services including up to 30 beds for youth experiencing homelessness in Chittenden County and an additional 10 in Franklin County.

Many of the youth that we see coming through our shelter programs have been in state custody at some point in their lives, and we see and hear from them directly the ways in which these early experiences of systems involvement have lasting effects on their mental health, stability, and sense of autonomy.

Spectrum staff will work tirelessly alongside these youth to ensure that their experiences of homelessness are brief and nonrecurring, and we often find ourselves questioning what interventions could have been applied sooner to prevent these young people from exiting state custody and entering homelessness.

H657 helps answer that question. Unaccompanied minors who are able to consent to their own access to services and resources that they desperately need, in the moment that they seek them, will be less likely to need those services long term.

In 2019 DCF approached Spectrum to start what is called the Compass Program. This is a case management program intended to serve youth ages 12-23 who are in need of stabilization services. One goal of this program is to prevent youth from entering DCF

custody. We provided this service to youth and families in Chittenden County for several years before expanding to also serve Franklin County.

Often, Compass clinicians encounter youth in need of crisis stabilization support, but whose guardian is absent or otherwise unable to engage with service providers' outreach, despite the significant time and effort dedicated to making these connections.

It is rare that a guardian is unwilling to consent to their child accessing services, it is much more common that the guardian is struggling to engage to the degree necessary to provide consent. These youth are on the cusp of receiving sometimes truly life-saving care, and these clinicians are left in a position of weighing the degree of risk if this young person is left unserved.

H657 creates a pathway to care and resources for some of our most vulnerable community members. By bridging those connections early and with their agency intact, youth are able to build networks of support that can prevent them from experiencing long term homelessness into adulthood.

Beyond increasing access to critical supportive services and necessary documentation, H657 Section 3 outlines another critical, and long overdue prevention measure to ensure that youth in foster care are given access to the social security benefits that they are rightfully due.

At Spectrum, we have piloted a program to provide temporary financial support to youth, specifically reaching youth who are experiencing homelessness and are at greatest risk of long-term instability. The program is called Direct Cash Transfers; it was developed over several years drawing on research from Chapin Hall, a policy research center focused on child welfare based out of the University of Chicago. Through our Direct Cash Transfer program, we provide a cohort of youth \$1500 a month for 18 months. Since launching the program in 2023, we have witnessed these funds go towards building a credit history, covering a down payment on a car, paying off debts, moving costs to live closer to family, and rent on their own apartment!

For youth exiting foster care, access to the financial benefits that they are rightfully due can be the difference between stability, and long-term experiences of homelessness. It is incumbent upon the state of Vermont to pass H657 and ensure that these benefits be protected for our community's most vulnerable youth, and that their autonomy be preserved in accessing these funds for their transition into adulthood.

As a shelter operator I am focused on how we can intervene to make sure that youth homelessness is rare, brief, and nonrecurring, and how we can prevent youth from entering our shelters in the first place. I see young people every day come through our shelter programs who have no identifying documents, no money, and no natural supports to lean on.

I look at H657, and I see an opportunity to resource these young people early with the autonomy to access the care and support that they need, when they need it, and the financial safety net that they are rightfully owed.

Thank you for your time and consideration.