

My name is Rafaela Botti; I am a 17-year-old high school junior from Addison County, who is a second-year intern with Outright Vermont and serves on the Youth Voice Committee of the Vermont State Youth Council. I am also a member of Middlebury Teen Center Inc.'s Board of Directors, where I work directly with young people navigating instability, family conflict, and housing insecurity. Throughout these roles, I have seen firsthand the results of unaccompanied youth being denied basic autonomy and what they need to stay safe, and because of this, I am in support of H.657, a bill endorsed by the Vermont State Youth Council. I am here today in my capacity as an Outright intern. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you today.

Within Vermont, many young people are relying on adults who are not present, not supportive, or unsafe. When youth do not have a stable, reliable caregiver, every barrier can become life-altering. Issues such as accessing medical care, mental-health support, or signing a housing document are impossible without a parent or guardian's consent. Young Vermonters will delay care, stay in unsafe situations, or couch-surf with adults, simply because they lack the legal ability to make decisions for themselves.

As you know, Vermont has one of the highest rates of homelessness in the country. In 2023, 3,295 Vermonters were experiencing homelessness, a number that has tripled since 2019 and increased in 19% in just one year. While the lack of housing affects all ages, youth, especially queer and trans youth, are a significant and often hidden part of this population.

H.657 directly addresses this gap by allowing unaccompanied homeless youth to obtain essential services without parental consent. This bill addresses the reality that many Vermont teens are facing. When they are already on their own and facing issues that no teen should have to face alone, our laws should not force young Vermonters to depend on adults who are absent, unsafe, or unwilling to support them. They deserve the dignity of making their own decisions in order to build a life on their own terms. They deserve systems that recognize their reality, not ones that deny them care because an adult from their lives is absent. They deserve the chance to make decisions that protect their well-being, rather than being dependent on people who *cannot* or *will not* show up for them.

From my work within my community, I can tell you that the difference between stability and crisis often comes down to whether a young person can access help at the moment they need it. H.657 gives them that chance. It gives service providers clarity. And it gives youth the autonomy many are already exercising each day without the legal recognition that keeps them safe.

I am also in support of allowing unaccompanied youth to obtain a certification without parental or adult consent. These young people are already living independently, therefore requiring consent from an adult who is absent, unsafe, or unwilling to support them is exactly the kind of legal trap that this bill hopes to eliminate.

Vermont prides itself on being a state that listens to and protects its young people. Passing H.657 is a necessary step toward living up to that value. I urge you to support this bill to ensure that

unaccompanied homeless youth are not left navigating adulthood without the rights they need to survive it.

Thank you for your time and continuous work for the betterment of Vermont.