



May 1, 2025

Senator Virginia Lyons
Chair, Senate Health and Welfare Committee

Dear Senator Lyons,

I'm writing to you regarding H.91, about which I have concerns. There are three distinct actions proposed by the bill. One could work (re GA hotel rooms) , one which I believe will be ineffective (the VHEARTH) , and one which I believe would be a serious mis-step (re the HOP.)

Moving the administration of the GA Emergency Hotel Room Program from the Vermont Department of Children and Families to the Community Action Programs could be an improvement. As run by DCF, this program has been fraught with disconnection, confusion, and a kaleidoscopic, ever-changing range of eligibility requirements that often keep vulnerable people out in the cold. We can do better.

The creation of the VHEARTH is, at its heart, a good concept. It envisions a group including representatives from the target population, representatives from the local Continuums of Care, and others who know what is needed to end homelessness. In more than four decades of work in the field of human services in Vermont, I have seen many similar task forces, committees, and commissions come and go, with valuable time and money spent, and people from all over the state taking time away from important work in their communities, to create another new paradigm that, in the end, doesn't make any ground breaking difference. We already know very well what is needed - housing, and the services that keep people housed. The same barriers have prevented significant progress to create sufficient housing for many decades. We need local zoning regulations to be adjusted, we need funds to build the housing, and we need money to pay for the skilled, dedicated staff members to be there to help people stay housed. Yet another state-level task force is unlikely to change that.

Regarding the proposal to shift administration of the Housing Opportunity Program (HOP) from the Vermont Office of Economic Opportunity to the Community Action Programs, I and many of my colleagues are greatly concerned.

The HOP is a very complex program with many technical requirements . The OEO has for many years been the entity to solicit and accept applications for grant funds, and to ensure that grantees are operating their programs in a manner that meets the strict requirements , and measuring the outcomes. The HOP, as administered by OEO, is a shining example of an effective, successful, well -run program that has helped many thousands of Vermonters avoid and end homelessness. Why in the world would we move the HOP out of their jurisdiction? Especially during this time of great uncertainty.

In the near future, it is very likely that our social safety net will continue to fray and unravel. Food programs, access to medical care, and much more will be cut. And federally funded services to the homeless, including those with severe mental illness and substance use disorders, will be dismantled. It's likely that even the bedrock of affordable housing, the Section 8, Section 811, and Section 210 rental subsidy programs will be defunded, leaving us with vast numbers of affordable housing projects unable to keep the heat and lights on. Individuals and families who have tenant choice vouchers will be left without the rental assistance that has kept them safely housed. This is frightening, but very possible.

Right now we need to approach our work with steadiness and caution. This is not a time for reinventing what is working. We need OEO's guidance to keep all of us operating the HOP for as long as possible. The last thing we need at this time is to toss all the cards up in the air in the hope of saving a few dollars. In the end, the costs will be far higher and the suffering much greater.

I urge your committee not to pass H.91 as written.

Respectfully yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jeanne Montross". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jeanne Montross, M.S
Executive Director