



groundworks
COLLABORATIVE

H.91 Testimony

Senate Committee on Health & Welfare

April 16, 2025

My name is Libby Bennett. I am the executive director of Groundworks Collaborative. We offer food, shelter, and supportive housing services for over 5,500 people each year in Brattleboro.

We operate a 40-bed, year-round, 24/7 overnight shelter. In that same space, we operate a daytime Drop-In Center that supports up to 100 people each day. We are also gearing up to break ground this summer on an additional 40-bed shelter to open in early Fiscal Year 2027.

Our shelter and housing support programs together served 871 people last year. Our Outreach Team, in the nearly 14 months they have been deployed to the streets of Brattleboro, has engaged with over 270 unique individuals living unsheltered in our community.

I want to thank you for taking up the work of better understanding the potential outcomes of H.91 as proposed.

It is no secret that our current systems fall short of meeting the need for emergency shelter statewide. This system is already underfunded to meet the need.

The current iteration of H.91 shelves and dismisses the thoughtful year of work and recommendations from the General Assistance (GA) Emergency Housing Task Force and has the potential to inflict undue harm to the systems supporting Vermonters experiencing homelessness.

The currently proposed H.91 legislation seeks to decentralize funding for both the GA emergency motel program and the Housing & Opportunity Grant Program (HOP) that funds our system of shelters in the state.

Shifting the responsibility of administering these programs to our regional Community Action partners does not solve the inadequacy of funding for the system overall. In this proposed restructure, there are additional organizations for funds to pass through, all of which will have

basic needs met with dignity

GroundworksVT.org | PO Box 370, Brattleboro, VT 05302 | 802.302.8301



needs for drawing down administrative funds to cover their important work and pay staff to run these vital programs. Without a significant increase in funding overall, this will decrease the amount of funding available for providing direct support services to people experiencing homelessness.

This proposed wholesale restructure fails to recognize the skilled and substantive systems we have in place to provide meaningful support to Vermonters in some of the most vulnerable situations and to do this work well. I am here to ask for your consideration to rethink this proposal in a way that protects what is not broken.

I have no doubt that shifting administration of the GA emergency motel program to a regional model would be well handled by our Community Action agencies (CAPs). The GA program has shown us time and time again that it has numerous and significant flaws in the effort to keep vulnerable Vermonters sheltered.

However, the well-functioning shelter system that has been closely regulated by the state's Office of Economic Opportunity—who hold shelters accountable through habitability inspections, setting safety standards, and through both fiscal and programmatic monitoring—deserves your critical attention.

Please ask yourselves: why are we making changes to a system that is providing high-quality services to Vermonters experiencing homelessness?

The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) plays a critical role in the provision of technical assistance to shelter programs throughout the state, making our programs stronger and safer—with robust training, monitoring, evaluation, and standard setting that allows all Vermonters to access robust services when utilizing shelters in Vermont. Moreover, OEO is lean and cost-effective. This part of the system is not broken and should not be dismantled.

As a provider of life-saving shelter, Groundworks has worked to raise funds to build a new shelter to help meet a priority of this administration: adding critically needed shelter capacity in Brattleboro—identified as a high-priority region given the numbers of Vermonters accessing the GA motel program in our community. In partnership and consultation with OEO, we have built the operating pro forma for the new shelter with the understanding that operations funding would be available to staff it when we open our doors in FY27. Our



counterpart agency in the Upper Valley has done the same—leveraging local community dollars to meet the extraordinary need for sheltering Vermonters in vulnerable situations.

I come today representing a network of shelter providers in Vermont, who do incredible work—writing housing case plans that address barriers, streamlining prioritization and applications for scarce permanent housing opportunities, and navigating the many barriers to achieving permanent housing in our gridlocked crisis-level housing market.

It is imperative that we not conflate the many challenges of the GA motel program with the service-rich and high-performing work done by shelters across the state.

We cannot afford to have these essential services reduced for people who need them, nor can we justify the additional administrative costs associated with dismantling systems that have been built over decades only to rebuild them in ways that will serve fewer people.

I'd like to underscore that the shelter system is not broken and does not need fixing.

Thank you for your consideration.

Libby Bennett (she/her)
Executive Director
LBennett@GroundworksVT.org | 802-302-8301