

To whom it may concern regarding act 143: An act relating to establishing the Vermont Homelessness Response Continuum,

I am a family physician that has worked with the homeless population in the Burlington area providing primary care for the past 10 years. I would like to recount a recent patient experience that I had this week which highlights the problems with the state's current response to homelessness plan.

I help take care of a gentleman in his mid 60s who came to Vermont this summer from out of state. He has been homeless for a number of years now. He suffers from poorly controlled diabetes with numbness and swelling in his legs and difficulty with urinary incontinence. He does not use any illicit substances or smoke at all. Like many people that I see he doesn't carry a major mental health diagnosis but has an odd personality, with sometimes illogical beliefs, low education level, illiteracy, and doesn't always make the best decisions around his own health and safety. He has been sleeping outside in city hall park. His legs have been gradually getting more and more swollen as he has been sleeping outside, and walking around on his feet all day. He doesn't have access to a bathroom at night so has been having accidents and soiling himself, which only makes his skin issues worse. He has engaged in care with us weekly unfortunately has not had any improvement in his condition. He has some prior trauma and anxiety around shelter so has not felt comfortable going into the shelter system.

This week his legs have gotten much worse, with more swelling, open ulcers, sores and infection. He is nearly at the point where he should be admitted to the hospital, but we are working hard to prevent that. With the rapport we have built we were able to finally help him agree to going inside to get off his feet and heal. We provided him with all the information about shelter systems and emergency housing however due to his education level and overall functioning he was not capable of contacting shelters or ESD to secure a motel room by himself. Luckily he was connected with a case manager who was able to help him in this process. There are no shelter beds available right now and it took the case manager 3 days and over 6 hours of time on the phone with ESD to finally secure a bed for him at a motel. This is definitely not something he could have done by himself. And luckily he was in a place to come back daily to check on the status of this request as he doesn't have a reliably working phone.

The system is more than cumbersome. It is inaccessible to most people experiencing homelessness. This gentleman, and so many other people I see every day, are not able to navigate the emergency housing system themselves. And even if he was able to navigate it himself, the time and location and transportation barriers to access emergency housing are immense. This man just needs to be inside, with his feet up with access to a bathroom

to make a significant impact on his health and prevent him from ending up in the hospital for days.

In a time when there are more people experiencing homelessness every year, with more complex health needs, there needs to be more accessible immediate emergency housing and more accessible longer term shelter options. We have capacity to do this if we simply decide to put resources and energy to actually making solutions.

I strongly urge the state to do 3 things.

First, increase the number of emergency housing beds for elderly and medically vulnerable adults and families. And improve the efficiency of this system by creating a database or online portal with available beds to speed up the process of placing people into emergency housing (i.e. partner with private company that does online booking for other services).

Second, open more shelter beds in Chittenden county. There should just be state level funded shelter beds (Chittenden county is a catch all for people from all over the state, this is not just a county or city level problem, and needs more support from the state).

Third, help support opening a larger low barrier shelter community in Chittenden county. I think a larger version of the elmwood pods shelter community, with individual pods style units, embedded resources and support, bus line access, and community and purpose creating activities and on site work is what we really need for many chronically homeless individuals who cannot integrate into the typical apartment rental and employment structure of society.

This is a complex problem that will take many creative avenues and systemic changes to improve, but it must come with commitment and financial support to make changes.

Thank you for your attention and your efforts.

Sincerely,

Lincoln Heath, MD