

Written Testimony on the Implementation of Act 143 and the Vermont Homelessness Response Continuum

Submitted to: House Committee on Human Services and Senate Committee on Health and Welfare

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Dear Members of the House Committee on Human Services and Senate Committee on Health and Welfare,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony regarding the implementation of Act 143 and the Vermont Homelessness Response Continuum. My name is Taylor Thibault, and I serve as the Associate Director of Homeless Prevention Initiatives at Champlain Housing Trust, where I oversee Harbor Place, a motel-based emergency housing program in Shelburne, and Elmwood Community Shelter, a 30-room, low-barrier emergency shelter in Burlington. I also serve as Co-Chair of the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance.

I appreciate the Legislature's efforts to establish a more coordinated, housing-focused response to homelessness and recognize the importance of reducing reliance on hotel and motel placements while developing more sustainable alternatives. I also appreciate that Section 7 of Act 143 explicitly acknowledges that the Department and community partners do not yet have the capacity to fully implement the continuum and that fiscal year 2027 is intended to be a period of transition. As someone working directly with individuals and families experiencing homelessness, I have seen firsthand how challenging this transition has been, particularly as new administrative processes and eligibility requirements are implemented while the systems and resources necessary to support them are still being developed. I hope to offer some perspective on the practical challenges we are encountering, the impact these challenges are having on vulnerable households, and the opportunities we have to strengthen implementation so that the continuum can achieve its intended goals without inadvertently creating additional instability for the people it is designed to serve.

One of the most immediate challenges we have encountered since the September 1 implementation of the emergency rules has been the difficulty households face simply trying to access or renew emergency housing through the Economic Services Division (ESD). On the first day of implementation alone, Harbor Place identified seven households who were attempting to reach ESD and were unable to get through. What makes this particularly concerning is that these

households were already staying at Harbor Place, where they had access to a safe place to sleep, electricity, and a phone. Even with that level of stability and access to basic resources, they were unable to successfully navigate the process. I cannot help but think about the individuals and families who are actively unsheltered, without reliable access to a phone, somewhere to charge it, or a safe place to spend hours waiting to speak with someone. For parents experiencing homelessness, these challenges are compounded by the need to maintain employment, get their children to school, attend appointments, and meet their families' most basic needs. In some cases, families need a safe and stable place to stay before they can even begin to navigate the administrative process required to access Level 4 assistance. Since implementation began, I have personally arranged temporary emergency housing for two families with children using alternative grant funding because administrative barriers prevented them from accessing Level 4 services in a timely manner. We were fortunate to have flexible resources available to bring these families indoors while we worked through the State's process, but I worry deeply about the households who do not have a provider available to coordinate temporary funding or advocate on their behalf. These experiences raise an important question about whether the process itself is accessible to the people it is intended to serve. If households who are already safely housed, with access to phones and basic resources, cannot reliably reach the system, how can we reasonably expect those who are living outside to do so?

Equally concerning is the limited access emergency housing providers and outreach teams have to timely information regarding household eligibility, placement authorizations, renewals, and extension decisions. At Harbor Place, our staff are regularly trying to determine whether a household has been approved to remain, whether a voucher has been renewed, or whether an individual or family must leave their room. We contact ESD, communicate with community partners, and attempt to obtain the information necessary to make decisions about room availability and continued placements. At times, we are doing this while a family is sitting in our office, frightened and asking whether they will have somewhere to sleep that evening. Recently, we submitted an extension request on behalf of a gentleman experiencing significant medical vulnerabilities. Despite concerns surrounding his health and the absence of an identified alternative housing option, the request was denied. Our team was left with the extraordinarily difficult responsibility of communicating that decision to someone we knew had nowhere else to go. We are expected to explain decisions we did not make, navigate processes over which we have limited influence, and help individuals identify next steps when there may be no realistic alternatives. I recognize that Act 143 establishes specific extension criteria and that not every circumstance will necessarily meet those requirements. However, these situations underscore the importance of individualized assessments, clear explanations of determinations, and meaningful consideration of medical circumstances and available alternatives. With appropriate confidentiality protections and necessary authorizations, emergency housing providers need timely access to decisions, the applicable reasoning, and information about available next steps, including notice and appeal rights where applicable. We cannot effectively serve as partners in the continuum without the information necessary to carry out our responsibilities.

These challenges become even more pronounced during evenings, weekends, and holidays, when the ability to communicate with ESD or resolve urgent placement concerns can be significantly limited. Housing emergencies do not occur exclusively during normal business hours. A household may receive authorization for a hotel placement but lack transportation or the practical

ability to arrive within the required check-in window, with no clear way to communicate those circumstances once offices have closed. Similarly, when someone is asked to leave a hotel placement over a weekend, they may have limited ability to clarify eligibility, explore another placement, or understand what options remain available within the continuum. This is especially concerning when a household reaches its authorized time limit over a weekend or holiday and has not received an extension determination or does not understand what steps are available to them. For someone without a safe place to sleep, waiting until the next business day is not a meaningful solution. I recognize that expanding administrative availability requires resources, but at a minimum, there must be clear and reliable procedures for urgent circumstances outside normal business hours, including a designated escalation process for contracted providers, communication about delayed arrivals, and advance coordination when placements are scheduled to expire over weekends or holidays. A statewide emergency housing continuum cannot function effectively if access to critical information and assistance effectively ends on Friday afternoon.

I recognize that Act 143 establishes a 70-day limit for Level 4 placements between April and November, subject to the extension provisions authorized in statute, and I understand the Legislature's intention to reduce reliance on hotels and motels. However, Section 2207 also expressly permits continued use of hotels and motels until sufficient permanent affordable housing or shelter services are available. That distinction is critical during this transition. At Harbor Place, we serve families with children, older Vermonters, individuals with disabilities, and people with significant medical or behavioral health needs. We have supported a family of six who were living in a rental van despite both parents being employed, as well as individuals whose medical conditions make traditional shelter settings difficult or inappropriate. Reaching the end of an authorized placement does not mean that an appropriate alternative has become available. The statutory extension provisions recognize circumstances involving medical necessity, disability-related accessibility needs, imminent health or safety risks, and households awaiting housing or treatment. I encourage the State to ensure that these provisions are administered through individualized assessments that reflect actual shelter and housing availability, accessibility, and household circumstances. A placement that exists within the continuum on paper does not necessarily represent a safe or appropriate option for a particular household.

The importance of having appropriate alternatives available is also reflected in the outcomes we are seeing when households leave emergency housing. Since June 2026, I have been tracking where households go after departing Harbor Place to better understand whether they are moving toward greater stability or returning to homelessness. Of the 115 households tracked, 67 exited directly into unsheltered homelessness, while another seven were sent to the hospital or would otherwise have been unsheltered. Ten households relied on temporary arrangements with friends or family, 14 paid out of pocket for another hotel, two experienced incarceration, and one individual passed away. Six households successfully transitioned into permanent housing, while eight households did not provide information regarding their exit destination. Particularly concerning, three households experienced repeated cycles of exiting into unsheltered homelessness and returning to Harbor Place, only to face additional exits related to administrative or engagement barriers. These outcomes span a period before and after the September implementation of Act 143, and I recognize that households leave emergency housing for a variety of reasons. While the six households who secured permanent housing represent

meaningful successes, the data also illustrates a much broader concern: **nearly six in ten households tracked left Harbor Place and went directly into unsheltered homelessness.** As we continue working to build a more comprehensive continuum, we cannot overlook what is happening to individuals and families when their emergency housing placements end. If our shared goal is to make homelessness rare, brief, and nonrecurring, we must pay close attention not only to how households access emergency housing, but also to whether they have somewhere safe and appropriate to go when they leave.

As implementation continues, I respectfully encourage the State to prioritize several practical improvements: ensuring households have accessible ways to apply for and renew assistance beyond prolonged telephone contact; establishing timely, reliable communication and clear escalation procedures for emergency housing providers; strengthening after-hours, weekend, and holiday processes for urgent placement concerns; providing clear guidance when extension requests remain unresolved as authorized placements approach expiration; and ensuring that individualized decisions reflect the actual availability and suitability of alternative housing options. I would also encourage the Department to use the reporting and oversight mechanisms already established by Act 143 to identify administrative barriers, delays in accessing assistance, and the circumstances of households who lose emergency housing without an identified alternative. These recommendations are not intended to revisit the statutory framework, but rather to ensure that the flexibility and protections contemplated by the Legislature are meaningful in practice.

I recognize that transitioning to the Vermont Homelessness Response Continuum is a significant undertaking and appreciate the efforts of state staff, policymakers, and community partners working to implement it. Across Chittenden County, organizations are actively working to expand shelter capacity, strengthen partnerships, and develop alternatives to hotel and motel placements, but those efforts require time, staffing, infrastructure, and sustainable funding. In the meantime, the people navigating this system are doing so during some of the most difficult moments of their lives. They are working parents trying to keep their children in school, individuals managing serious health conditions without stable housing, and families doing everything they can to secure a safe place to sleep. Act 143 establishes the goal of making homelessness rare, brief, and nonrecurring. Achieving that goal requires not only a coordinated continuum of services, but an accessible, responsive system that does not inadvertently create additional barriers for the very people it is intended to serve. My hope is that we use this transitional period to identify and address those barriers before administrative challenges result in additional homelessness.

Thank you for your consideration and your continued commitment to Vermonters experiencing homelessness.

Respectfully,

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