

Ellen Riley
Vermont DD/ID Housing Initiative parent member
Washington County, Act 186 Grant Committee

874 Howes Road
Moretown Vt. 05660
802-917-2476
jrervt@aol.com

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Thank you for giving me a chance to speak to you this afternoon.

My name is Ellen Riley, I am from Moretown, I am 70 years old, and I have a 27-year-old son with Down Syndrome.

Since the day my son was born, my constant concern and worry has been: who will care for him, keep him safe, make sure he has a permanent home, and a full, active, meaningful life when I can no longer provide that.

I am here today wearing two hats:

One as a member of the Vermont Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities(I/DD) Housing Initiative, a grass roots parent led initiative working to have the State create housing model options for individuals with I/DD. The initiative came about in 2021 after an Op-Ed written by Elizabeth Campbell appeared in Seven Days: "Vermont is a wonderful place to live UNLESS you have a child with a disability". She went on to describe the lack of housing for Vermont's I/DD population, especially for those with high needs. The Shared Living model or adult foster care, is the model the State created after closing Brandon Training school over 30 years ago. No other models have been developed, although that was promised. While this model works well for some, it does not work well for all, and, it is not a sustainable model.

Many parents, several in their 60's, 70's and 80's, who still had their young adult and adult children living with them, identified with this article and banded together to call on the State to meet this need and fulfill their promise.

My other hat is as the parent representative of the 2023 ACT 186 Grant awarded to Upper Valley Services Agency and Downstreet Housing and Community Development for the research and development of a housing model, or models, for individuals with I/DD. Two models were developed as a result of this Grant. Funding to build these models became available the following year (2024 legislative session) due to a Bill that was passed which changed language allowing the VHCB to fund grant proposal for this type of targeted housing.

Vermont is not meeting the requirement to provide housing options for individuals with I/DD. In 2023 it was determined that there were over 600 individuals with I/DD in immediate need of housing, I'm sure it is more today. If housing is not developed and built, we are looking at a huge addition to the homeless population in Vermont.

There are State owned properties not being utilized that could be developed to provided permanent housing for my son and many others individuals with I/DD. One housing model that is attractive to many parents is the Service Supported Peer Residence model. In this model, the local Housing Developer would own the building and the State Designated Agency or the SSA would manage the residents. Residents would live in efficiency apartments but there would be a communal kitchen, dining room, laundry room, a rec room for the peers to gather and socialize, and an office for the program director from the State agency that supports the individuals.

In the Capitol Complex there is a property, actually two, that could be considered for this model. Parking would not be an issue because the residents who would live there would not drive. Just one space would be needed for the agency's program director. There is easy walking access to downtown where there is potential employment, shopping and services. Having individuals with differences living within the State Complex is a wonderful opportunity for showing the contributions that individuals with difference bring to a community.

There are many steps in the process to move this kind of development forward, but it starts with identifying properties of interest. It can be a win-win for the State, for the State agencies that provide Home and Community based services, for the Development companies who need to create housing, and most importantly, for the many individuals with Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities who deserve to have safe, permanent home with services provided by their agency.

I am here today to ask you to think outside the box. As you look at state owned properties in both the Capitol Complex and throughout the state and discuss what should be done with them, please keep this option in mind. It could be a wonderful collaboration between the State, the State Agencies and Developers tasked with building housing.



