

Jess Hyman

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Good morning. My name is Jess Hyman, and I am the Associate Director of CVOEO's statewide Housing Advocacy Programs, including our Fair Housing Education Program.

CVOEO is one of Vermont's five regional community action agencies, working to advance economic, social, environmental, and racial justice and to support people in achieving economic independence. While many of our programs serve Franklin, Grand Isle, Chittenden, and Addison counties, our Housing Advocacy Programs are **statewide**, serving renters, people living in manufactured home communities, and individuals experiencing housing discrimination.

Through our statewide education and Support programs, we:

- Respond to more than **3,000 calls and emails each year** through our helplines for tenants and manufactured home residents;
- Provide **rights and responsibilities education** for renters, landlords, municipal officials, and service providers;
- Offer **housing stability and eviction prevention** support;
- Deliver **services and support organizations that work with asylum seekers**; and
- Administer a **temporary housing voucher program** for families exiting homelessness.

I am here today to share deep concerns about H.772, make a few policy suggestions, explain why early education and intervention are essential complements to policy, and reinforce critical funding requests.

Please note that I am not an attorney and I will happily leave the legal analysis to experts such as Jean Murray of Vermont Legal Aid and others. However, I have many years of experience working with tenants and landlords and people experiencing illegal discrimination in their housing, and I can speak to the likely impacts of the significant changes to landlord/tenant statute proposed in H.772.

H.772 will disproportionately impact vulnerable communities

Although we recognize the real community safety challenges caused by a small number of egregious situations, this bill significantly reduces due process protections for all of Vermont's approximately **76,000 renters**. These changes would disproportionately harm people with disabilities, people with limited English proficiency, and those already subject to discrimination or harassment.

Shortening eviction notice and response timelines makes it harder for tenants to access legal representation, eviction defense, or emergency rental assistance. The bill also makes multiple changes to

landlord–tenant law that weaken existing renter protections. While some provisions were intended to strike balance, the cumulative impact creates unnecessary harm.

We also have concerns about provisions that would codify landlord fees such as background or credit check charges, despite existing statutory limits on application fees. These are costs of doing business and should not be charged as add-on fees, especially in a severely constrained market, where a renter may have to apply for dozens of apartments in order to find a home. Other provisions, such as shortening the timelines for non-payment and breach of contract from existing statute; including posting notices on the door as “actual notice;” and including repeated late payment, refusal to allow landlord access, termination for no cause, and an undefined “other” reason for expedited eviction, are also problematic.

Current statute has maintained a good balance between landlord and tenant rights and responsibilities over many years and H.772 disrupts that balance.

A few alternatives to consider

If the core issue is the length of time eviction cases take to move through the courts, we believe that problem should be addressed by **increasing court capacity or establishing a housing court**, rather than eroding due process for all renters. CVOEO would support a separate approach that allows for expedited resolution in truly dangerous situations — but only if paired with tenant protections such as limited rent increases, good-cause eviction policies, and stability/retention services. This type of carve-out could be made separate from the existing bill as a way to address landlord and community safety needs without the cascading impacts of other changes proposed in H.772.

Additionally, any expedited process for landlords should be matched by **expedited hearings for tenants**, especially in cases involving habitability or landlord non-compliance, as well as **right to legal representation for tenants** in eviction cases, and **funding for rental arrearages**.

Specific changes to H. 772

We are not in support of this bill. However, if it is to move forward, here are a few fundamental changes related to termination notices and eviction timelines that would preserve tenant rights and due process while addressing the stated landlord desires to expedite the eviction process in certain extreme situations:*

- **Page 1, line 13 to Page 2, line 4:** Remove all new language added
 - Rationale: *(ii) delivered by sheriff service is included under (i) hand-delivered; all the email language is moot because it is in addition to the hand-delivered/mailed requirement.*

- **Page 6, line 9:** Add to 4464 Remedies for illegal evictions: When a landlord violates 9VSA 4463, a tenant may request injunctive relief, damages, costs, and reasonable attorney’s fees from the court.
- **Page 7, line 17:** Keep existing notice timeline for nonpayment of rent (14 days)
- **Page 7, line 20 and Page 8, line 8:** Remove repeated late payment as a cause for termination
 - Rationale: *This is a cost of doing business*
- **Page 8, line 10:** Remove tenant refusal to grant access as a cause for termination
- **Page 8, lines 16-20:** Restore criminal activity and add “actual or imminent threat,” to refer to definitions section
- **Page 8, line 13:** Keep existing notice timeline for breach of rental agreement (30 days)
- **Page 8, line 17:** Remove the overly broad wording “or other activities”
 - Rationale: *This could make it easier to discriminate against people with disabilities, BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and those in other protected classes*
- **Page 9, line 1:** Change the reduced 5 days to at least 7 (is 14 in existing statute)
 - Rationale: *5 days is not enough time to ensure due process and access to support, especially for people with disabilities and other vulnerable populations. If the actual notice is on a Thursday, 5 days would take it to Tuesday, which would give a maximum of 3 business days for the tenant to seek support and/or respond.*
- **Page 9, line 4:** Add “under the threat of perjury”
- **Page 10, lines 7-8 and 21:** Remove “government notice to vacate”
 - **Rationale:** *This is unnecessary since State and local inspectors already have the power to order a tenant to vacate if habitability issues require removal. If habitability issues are the result of landlord negligence, a tenant could be penalized with an eviction on their record.*
- **Page 11, line 4:** Remove “or repurposed”
 - Rationale: *Vague term*

* This list is not exhaustive, and we have several other suggested edits in other sections of the bill.

Why Fair Housing Education and Early Intervention Matter

Education and early intervention are essential to housing stability. Rental relationships are more successful when both landlords and tenants understand their rights and responsibilities; when renters have access to financial and housing education; and when neutral supports like Landlord Liaisons help resolve issues early.

These investments prevent evictions, reduce homelessness, strengthen landlord participation, and save the state money over time. We spend enormous resources responding to housing crises in Vermont. Investing in education and relationship-based supports helps stop those crises before they start.

Regardless of the outcome of H.772, **fair housing education and landlord liaison services are essential**. If significant law changes move forward, these services will be even more critical. A July 1st implementation date would be unworkable without sufficient time and funding to educate renters, landlords, courts, and service providers statewide.

Funding Requests

First, we respectfully urge the **restoration of the \$200,000 housing education appropriation removed from H.772** as it moved through the House. This funding is essential to sustaining statewide fair housing education and support for renters and landlords — services that prevent conflict, reduce evictions, and promote housing stability. Our Tenant Skills, Finding Housing, and Sustaining the Rent workshops, which are offered in various formats and languages, together with one-on-one coaching for renters and our Fair Housing rights and responsibilities trainings have immediate and long-term results.

Second, we urge you to support the **\$600,000 Landlord Liaison appropriation included in the House General bill**.

Landlord Liaisons are a proven, preventative strategy that support both landlords and tenants by:

- Building a strong, trusted network of landlords;
- Providing education, technical assistance, and problem-solving support;
- Improving/restoring communication and positive relationships between tenants and landlords before issues escalate;
- Helping landlords navigate difficult situations without turning immediately to eviction; and
- Promoting and sustaining housing stability.

When Landlord Liaisons are strategically placed locally, they create bridges between tenants, landlords, and service providers. They reduce misunderstandings, preserve tenancies, and help responsible landlords succeed — particularly small, local landlords who want help doing the right thing but often lack support. This work directly complements fair housing education and is foundational to any effort to reduce evictions and improve community safety.

In closing, we respectfully urge the Committee to:

- Protect due process while addressing serious safety concerns;
- Invest in solutions that strengthen housing stability, landlord participation, and community trust.
- Restore the \$200,000 Fair Housing Education and Support funding;
- Fund the \$600,000 Landlord Liaison initiative included in the House General bill;

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for your thoughtful consideration of these issues. CVOEO looks forward to collaborating with you to craft solutions that are fair, effective, and protect Vermont's most vulnerable residents.