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Feb. 16, 2021

Rep. Thomas Stevens, Chair
House Committee on General, Housing, and Military Affairs
Vermont State House
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

Dear Representative Stevens,

I very much appreciate the opportunity to provide written comments focused on Vermont's plan to restructure the General Assistance Temporary and Emergency Housing program by shifting administration of this program to a community-based model supported by homeless assistance grants to local agencies. I am the Executive Director of the Upper Valley Haven in White River Junction which provides emergency shelter and other services to support people in need of shelter and permanent housing.

Let me begin by saying that I agree with the recent testimony provided by ACD Commissioner Sean Brown and director of OEO Sarah Phillips to several legislative committees that there is great potential in this idea by changing from the current "rules-based" GA program to one that is based on client needs. This has the potential of allowing more flexible service models and tapping into the experience and knowledge of community organizations. This is the model that the state has used with great success to deliver shelter services, manage coordinated entry, provide supportive housing supports and, in response to the pandemic, provide housing navigation and other services to assist people in shelter in the motels to obtain secure housing.

That said, there remains much we do not know about the specific plans of the State for this transition which is now being planned while a worldwide pandemic remains in effect with unknown conditions that will exist at the time of the proposed transfer in October. And I also have concerns about the appropriate role for community organizations in a revised system in which the State of Vermont no longer takes on key responsibilities as outlined below.

Program Scale and Budgeted Resources

There are now more than 1800 households receiving temporary shelter in motels including several hundred families. How many will still be there in October, the time of the proposed transfer? Without profound changes in the current rental market through additions of new affordable housing units, more supportive housing services and more rent subsidies, how much

change can we reasonably expect from the community organizations to help these households now living in motels to transition to permanent housing?

The number of affected households in October raises the question of whether there will be sufficient dollars in the contracts to manage this scale of program implementation. What were the criteria for developing the budget for the program? In addition, even as the pandemic ends, economists suggest there will be a long tail to the economic dislocation affecting people who are poor and marginally employed. This also has implications for service levels and budgets. Finally, has the state considered that removal of the GA categorical eligibility will have the affect increasing demand for these services that were controlled by these very categories?

Last year, OEO used historic trends in motel utilization as a means for regional budget allocation. The amounts being proposed were woefully inadequate. How has this year altered that data and assumptions? Wouldn't it be better to build a budget based on the program resource needs that relies on the expertise of these community organizations?

Timing of Project Implementation

Commissioner Brown has stated that the exact timeline for program implementation might shift based on the conditions of the pandemic. At present, the pandemic remains a threat to health and safety. It is unknown whether congregate care in shelters, the primary alternative to motels for emergency shelter, will be a safe option in October throughout the state.

Perhaps it would be valuable frame the plan for a transition based on the metrics that need to be in place at the time of the change in program administration? Or at least that these metrics would scale the program response in terms of resources. Such metrics could include the number of households still residing in motels, the percentage of Vermonters who have been vaccinated, community virus infection rates, rental housing vacancy rates and the unemployment rate.

Role of the State

There is also concern that through this plan the State of Vermont will alter the relationship between the community providers and people in need of services. If the community organization is placed in the position of denying access to shelter with no other recourse, this challenges our role as advocates for people who are homeless and can damage relationships between case managers and clients. Also, if services are denied will the community organizations be required to defend their decisions in an appeal process before a Human Services Board?

And if contracted funding is inadequate or demand outstrips budgets due to economic conditions, will the state provide increased funding for community organizations through budget adjustments? At present, the State of Vermont is the backup to meeting human services

needs affecting life safety as it should be. Community organizations should not be expected to take on that role.

In Closing

I urge that if this idea is put into effect the state remain a backstop for the unexpected, not just ask the community agencies to manage this program on our own. If we've learned anything over this past year is that we must continue to respond to the challenges before us with imagination, experience, sufficient resources and a continuous focus on safety for all. Working cooperatively, I believe we can design and implement a program that has improved outcomes and the cost savings the State desires. But this initiative needs to be considered with a focus on the risks of taking precipitous action without sufficient planning and incorrect assumptions about the proper roles for that State and community organizations. I encourage the members of the House Committee on General, Housing, and Military Affairs to keep that in mind as well.

Sincerely,



Michael Redmond
Executive Director

CC: Members of the Committee
Erhard Mahnke, Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition