



**Sue Minter, Executive Director  
Capstone Community Action**

**Testimony For Homelessness Awareness Day  
January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020  
House Human Services & House General, Housing & Military Affairs**

Hello I am Sue Minter, Executive Director of Capstone Community Action Agency, an anti-poverty organization that has been working to lift Vermonters out of poverty since 1965. We are one of five Community Action Agencies that work as a network of support for vulnerable Vermonters across the state. As regionally-based non-profits, the Community Action Agencies work collectively and through an array of services to help Vermonters make ends meet, build stronger families and communities, and open doors of economic opportunity. Capstone Community Action serves Washington, Lamoille and Orange Counties along with several towns in Windsor County.

I would like to begin my testimony quoting a member of our staff who deals directly and daily with homeless families in our service area. My testimony proceeds to an outline of our work in our service territory. I conclude with one story which underscores the collective work of housing providers in our area and the success we are able to achieve when working effectively together.

*"...In Vermont it is often hidden. People couch surf to survive, as the elements are harsh here. When people couch surf, especially people with disabilities, youth, and LGBTQ youth, they are at a high risk of victimization, from the moment they are behind closed doors. Human trafficking and abuse thrives when people are hidden. Folks sleep in campers and tents that are not heated in the winter, lit by one kerosene lamp, if they are lucky enough to have one. They sleep in storage containers, dumpsters, under bridges... they are hidden from every day view. Children do homework by that kerosene lamp.*

*These are people that look just like you and me. They are citizens. They are children. They are the business owner in our community who became disabled. They are working single moms who developed cancer or single dads who lost their job. The youth who was kicked out when they told their family that they are gay.*

*I would like more funding for affordable housing, raising income guidelines so working folks can afford housing. I would like all Vermonters to yell at the top of their lungs that there is a housing crisis right here in Vermont. I would like everyone to look into their mirrors and realize the face of homelessness looks just like you. I would like action."*

*"I would like to stop handing out Mylar blankets..."*

*- Michele Sullivan-DuBois, Coordinated Entry Specialist, Capstone Community Action*

Capstone Community Action provides housing supports across our three counties and sits at numerous statewide and regional housing provider tables. Within the "3-legged stool" of Housing policy – building

affordable housing units, providing housing subsidy and providing housing services – Capstone is a housing service provider. We work with people facing homelessness to provide prevention and eviction assistance and can issue Rapid Rehousing vouchers for Homeless households.

In Washington County, Capstone provides nine (9) emergency apartments for homeless households. We are the lead agency (point of contact) for Coordinated Entry and we chair our local Continuum of Care -- a comprehensive meeting including county wide stake holders who steer the direction of homeless systems and supports in the county. In Lamoille County, Capstone is also the lead for Coordinated Entry.

Since July 1, 2019, across all three counties we serve, we have seen 189 households totaling 527 individuals. In Washington County Capstone receives approximately 150 phone calls a month from housing insecure households.

### **Homelessness Prevention Work:**

- In a rural area with less than 1% vacancy rates and rents that exceed Fair Market, prevention and retention work is imperative to the goal of ending homelessness.
- Through Prevention work we:
  - work with households to identify barriers to stable housing
  - help them create an action plan that will help them overcome those barriers through education, connection to other community supports, etc.
  - work with them to create sustainable budgets
  - help them communicate with their landlords and mediate conflicts to stabilize their housing
  - teach tenants about their rights and responsibilities
  - work with them to identify alternative housing options if their current situation is not salvageable
  - identify a plan that will help them avoid eviction going forward
- Through Retention work we:
  - Provide further support toward overcoming the barriers they've identified in their action plans by providing ongoing case management and connecting them to other community supports
  - Retention work is also viewed favorably by landlords and in many cases is leveraged to convince a landlord to take a chance on a household

### **What does Homelessness and Housing Insecurity look like in Central Vermont?**

- Between July 1, 2019 – December 31, 2019, Capstone Community Action served the following:
  - **Homeless Households**
    - 37 Individuals
      - 1 age 18-24
      - 18 age 25-49
      - 14 age 50-64
      - 4 age 65+
    - 45 Families (*representing 142 people*)

- 10 in households with 2 or more adults & no children
  - 16 in households with 2 or more adults & children
  - 19 in households with 1 adult & children
- **Homeless Households in Emergency Shelter Units**
  - 16 Families (*representing 40 people*)
    - 1 in a household with 2 or more adults & no children
    - 3 in households with 2 or more adults & children
    - 12 in households with 1 adult & children
- **Formerly Homeless Households receiving Retention Services with Rapid Rehousing Vouchers**
  - 2 Individuals
    - 2 age 25-49
  - 5 Families (*representing 17 people*)
    - 3 in households with 2 or more adults & no children
    - 2 in households with 1 adult & children
- **Precariously Housed Households**
  - 41 Individuals
    - 3 age 18-24
    - 16 age 25-49
    - 18 age 50-64
    - 4 age 65+
  - 42 Families (*representing 181 people*)
    - 7 in households with 2 or more adults & no children
    - 12 in households with 2 or more adults & children
    - 23 in households with 1 adult & children

**What does Homelessness and Housing Insecurity look like in Lamoille County?**

- Between July 1, 2019 – December 31, 2019, Capstone Community Action served the following:
  - **Homeless Households**
    - 63 individuals (46 adults and 17 children) that were literally homeless
    - 24 people placed in permanent housing
    - On average it took 77 days to house adult-only households and 104 days to house families with children
    - Currently 28 adults and 9 children accounted for in the Homeless Management Information System
    - We currently sponsor 5 households that consist of 7 adults and 3 children with Rapid Rehousing Vouchers, a medium-term housing subsidy (up to 24 months) that includes case management
    - One family has a Vermont Rental Subsidy voucher for 1 year of subsidy and case management

- **Precariously Housed Households**
  - Support for precariously housed community members to stay housed is critically important in Lamoille County, particularly since the vacancy rate for affordable housing is less than 1%. Rental arrears is the primary reason households are at risk of losing housing
  - We were able so far to prevent 36 people (17 adults and 19 children) from homelessness
  - Income eligibility for financial assistance is very low (\$15,500 for an individual, \$21,330 for family of 3) so we are limited on who we may help. Between low incomes, high rents, and available funding, the need is far greater than our ability to help

**Additionally in Lamoille County:**

- There is a seasonal shelter in Lamoille County. It does not serve families with children under the age of 18
- There are very limited hotels/motels in the region where a family can stay, and they are located far from social and medical services that households need to access
- Public transportation opportunities to access shelter are limited in this very geographically rural area. It is often difficult for people with no access to private transportation to access emergency housing services
  - People who are living in these areas are faced with extremely difficult decisions:
    - Employment – choosing between a job and shelter
    - Education – it complicates their ability to keep their children in their school system
    - Access to support networks – doctors, mental health services, human services relationships, the ability to continue working with people they've already built relationships with when they are displaced
- What has worked?
  - Partnerships and coalitions such as Housing Solutions teams maximize access to services
  - Affordable housing options, access to housing subsidies, increased positive relationships with private landlords

**Homelessness in Orange County:**

- There are no shelters/shelter services in Orange or Northern Windsor Counties. The nearest shelters are:
  - Hartford - 35 miles from Randolph
  - Barre – 25 miles from Randolph
- There are very limited hotels/motels in the region where someone could be put up
- Public transportation opportunities to access shelter are limited in this very geographically rural area and it is often difficult for people with no access to private transportation to access emergency housing services

- People who are living in these areas are faced with extremely difficult decisions:
  - Employment – choosing between a job and shelter
  - Education – it complicates their ability to keep their children in their school system
  - Access to support networks – doctors, mental health services, human services relationships, the ability to continue working with people they've already built relationships with when they are displaced
- What has worked?
  - Access to longer term transitional housing with access to ongoing case management
  - Affordable housing options

I would like to close my testimony with a story that illuminates the horrific situation of Vermonters in poverty, and also underscores what can happen when dedicated staff work together to address a dire situation.

*"...Dec 2018, I met an elderly couple. They lived in an unfinished home that had never been completed. They had no heat, no running water or plumbing, but did have electric with one light to see by. The winter before had been cold and they experienced many days below zero in their home. The man had a bout with frost bite and lost several toes. They knew they could not live there another winter but did not have resources for an alternate place. When they came to Capstone, I informed them of the shelter that was waiting to get its zoning approval. I later learned they became guests at the shelter. They spent the next few months warm and sheltered during the nights. They had many challenges and many partner organizations worked frantically to get them housed. When the shelter closed, AHS Field Services Director, Will Eberle, was able to use some of his AHS money to house them short term, the HST team came together and with many partners providing wrap around services we eventually got them a Rapid Rehousing Voucher. With all these supports we were able to finally get them housed this fall. They are doing remarkably well and still have many providers and are connected with appropriate services to meet their multiple needs. On the day they received their keys they called all their service providers to thank them for all the help they received..."*

*- Pat Turner, Housing Services Coordinator, Capstone Community Action*

**Thank you for your time and attention to these important issues. My plea is that you will expand support for our work so that we can continue to provide critically needed services to try to address and prevent homelessness and housing insecurity. Without a home, no one can thrive. Over thirty percent (30%) of the families in Capstone's Head Start program are homeless – this is children under the age of six! Our next generation is depending upon us.**