

Testimony of Renee Weeks of West Newbury, VT
Director of Shelter & Clinical Services at the Upper Valley Haven and
Co-chair for the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness
January 15, 2020

Good morning. Thank you for your service to the State of Vermont. My name is Renee Weeks. I grew up in Manchester, VT and currently reside in West Newbury. I have worked professionally in human services in Vermont since 1999. I have worked for the Upper Valley Haven as the Director of Shelter and Clinical Services for the past 9 years. I also serve as the co-chair for the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness.

The Upper Valley Haven is a private, nonprofit organization that provides shelter, food, problem-solving and education in the Upper Valley. We operate three emergency shelters, a food shelf, we provide housing navigation, housing retention and supportive housing services. We also do homeless outreach in partnership with the Hartford Police Department. We provide an afterschool and summer program for school-aged children who have the common experience of homelessness. The Upper Valley Haven is the lead Coordinated Entry agency for the area. Coordinated Entry is the process by which people are assessed and prioritized for some housing resources in the state.

I am also here as representative of the VT Coalition to End Homelessness. As a coalition, we believe that everyone has a right to be housed. The Haven shares in that essential value. The Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness acts as the primary decision-making body of the Vermont Balance of State Continuum of Care and supports the work of local Continuums of Care with the goal that people living in Vermont have safe, stable, affordable housing and if homelessness occurs it is a brief and rare occurrence during which everyone is treated with dignity and respect.

From June through October, I was invited to be a part of the Agency of Human Services Specialized Housing Voucher Workgroup as a service provider representative. The Workgroup issued its final report with recommendations in November. The report addresses all three legs of the metaphorical stool needed to address housing insecurity and homelessness: housing development, rent subsidies and the funding of housing support services. This report also speaks to the value of partnerships between housing developers/managers and housing service providers. For example, the Upper Valley Haven has partnered with Twin

Pines Housing, the local nonprofit housing developer and manager on many projects through the years. The collaboration has been an effective way to help people attain and sustain housing. We recently were invited to present at a charette hosted by the Corporation for Supportive Housing on one of our partnerships.

Over the past few months, I have had the opportunity to provide housing case management to a small caseload of people while one of my staff was on family leave. During that time, I worked with a woman who has been homeless off and on for the past 5 years. She has experienced chronic homelessness (which is defined by HUD as staying in a place not meant for human habitation for 12 months or more continuously or having 4 episodes within the past three years that total up to 12 months; and has been diagnosed with a disabling condition.) I will call her by the alias, "Betty." Betty and her boyfriend arrived at the Haven Seasonal Shelter about this time last year. They had been staying in a Seasonal Shelter in another area of the state but were asked to leave due to the behavior of the boyfriend. They stayed in our Seasonal Shelter until we closed in late April. When the shelter closed, they camped outside for a while. In May we were able to admit them into our adult emergency shelter. Betty was engaged with mental health services to help manage her anxiety and depression. After being in the emergency shelter for a week, she said, "Boy, I can actually relax now." She was referring to the trauma of living a life where you may have a place to sleep, but you don't really know where you will be during the day or where your next meal may come from. She had been living under the stress of uncertainty and could not focus on anything more than trying to figure out where to sleep and how to eat. After being settled in the shelter, Betty stated she felt safe and comfortable enough to begin seeking employment. With the help of her housing case manager, she was able to get a 32 hour per week position as a custodian at an assisted living facility. Meanwhile, she was included on our coordinated entry list for a shelter plus care subsidy; with time her name rose to next on the list based on need. She is currently in process of working with Pathways Vermont to get her subsidy. Once that is in place we will work as a team to help find an apartment that will accept the subsidy.

It is amazing to witness what "stability" brings to people. I have seen "housing stability" totally transform people and their lives. Stability increases their bandwidth so that they may focus on the things in their lives that aids in sustaining what they have. There was no way Betty would have been able to work while using the Seasonal Shelter or living in a tent under a bridge overpass or by the railroad tracks. In the Seasonal Shelter, you need to leave every

morning. The unpredictability of not knowing if you will get a bed at the shelter every night is scary. The shelter may be full before you get there. Then what? Trying to navigate all of that while also working is overwhelming.

If we want Vermonters to be stable and successful, we must “house” them first. In order to house people first, we need to have housing subsidies and affordable housing. We need to have increased housing stock and landlords willing to work with us. Our clients also need, in many cases, supportive services. The Upper Valley Haven runs four programs that provide supportive housing services: Family Supportive Housing Program, Shelter Plus Care Program, Rapid Rehousing Program, and the Parkhurst Program. When services are provided, 92% of the most vulnerable households have remained housed in these programs.

I would also like to address some of the needed program improvements in the housing voucher programs. When people receive one of the Continuum of Care funded Shelter Plus Care or Rapid Rehousing Subsidies, there is a service match component. These services are typically provided by a designated mental health agency, Pathways Vermont, or a housing/homeless service provider. Mental Health providers have eligibility criteria for their programs because they bill Medicaid to cover the cost of their services. Homeless service providers have much less stringent eligibility criteria, but also have much less service capacity because most do not receive funding for the supportive housing services they offer. Coordinated Entry processes and prioritization for vouchers are dependent on who is connected to services or eligible for mental health services, rather than who really is the most vulnerable or may be higher on the prioritization list. We should have a fair system in a small state.

We also need to recognize that much of the time, people experiencing chronic homelessness do not acknowledge their need for mental health treatment, and do not want to engage in services with a mental health agency. If their name is at the top of the list for a Shelter Plus Care subsidy, they would need a housing support provider to meet the service match requirement for the subsidy. We need to provide service funding to homeless/housing services providers to increase service capacities to serve people who qualify for permanent supportive housing subsidies, and do not wish to receive services from mental health organizations. Currently, we have 98 households on our Coordinated Entry list with 28 households meeting the criteria for chronic homelessness and are eligible for Shelter Plus Care subsidies.

In addition, our current waitlist for our Family Supportive Housing Program is 22 families. All eligible Vermonters should have access to this successful program. It would be ideal if we could attach housing subsidies to this program for anyone who needs it. This was one of the recommendations made by the Specialized Housing Voucher Workgroup.

The question really comes down to, "How do we fund all this?" There is no easy solution, but it is befuddling to think that we pay approximately \$50K to house an inmate per year, and the cost of housing a household experiencing homelessness with support services would cost us about \$5-10K per year depending on what level of service is needed. I think its important to fund what programs and services we know work to keep people safe.

Before I conclude, I encourage you to please ask your colleagues on the Appropriations Committee to approve the budget adjustment for 24-hour access to emergency shelter through the general assistance program. While it is not a solution to homelessness, it is a resource for people on the when shelters are full. It has been reassuring when our seasonal shelter is at capacity that others coming through the door on the coldest of winter nights have an alternative to a tent or car.

Thank you for listening and for your attentiveness to the homeless and housing issues our state continues to face.