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**To:** [Bristol Town Administrator](#)  
**Cc:** [knight@gmavt.net](mailto:knight@gmavt.net)  
**Subject:** Bristol Equity Committee  
**Date:** Wednesday, June 12, 2024 11:10:18 AM  
**Attachments:** [January 18, 2024 Testimony Working Draft.pdf](#)  
[JAN29 Advocacy Day Talk.pdf](#)

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Valerie,

Below is a copy of the initial email I sent to Porter. It includes a little of my history, and some areas I've been placing my time/attention. Please feel free to share with whomever you feel is necessary.

After speaking with Ian initially, I'm intrigued to learn more about the committee, and its potential goals/mission. While I might not fit what the lay person might qualify as diversity in the current environment, I do have experiences with: homelessness/poverty, mental health challenges, physical disabilities... and navigating those systems. I still have those connections and can share my experiences, and speak for some of those who are unable or afraid to advocate for themselves.

So I'm definitely looking to learn more about the committee, and if this something that works for all of us... join in some capacity.

I've also attached a copy of the testimonials presented in Montpelier.

- Jan 18th was in regards to homelessness
- Jan 29th was in regards to mental health

Thank you,

Bryan

Hi, my name is Bryan Plant II.

I recently met with Ian Albinson, he was biking in the area and stopped to talk with me as I live at the Firehouse Apartments. We got to talking, about... well, many topics tied to housing for low income folks, and various services. I mentioned that I've done some volunteer advocacy as of late, and he mentioned a new committee/group that might be something to consider becoming involved with locally.

A little about me... I have recently come out of homelessness. I spent just under a year in the John Graham Shelter in Vergennes, followed by 2 years in transitional housing until a spot opened up. I'm a client of the Counseling Service of Addison County (CSAC). And I'm currently receiving SSDI due to health challenges. I don't normally like to lead with that, but it's relevant in terms of having been through what many vulnerable Vermonters have experienced.

In spite of my experiences & limitations, as I'm trying to figure out what the next chapter of my life is going to be, I've made time to do some volunteer work in related areas. I've provided testimony on homelessness in Montpelier twice. In January I gave a small speech on mental health for Advocacy Day. I've recently worked with a few state and federal legislators to raise awareness of the need for funding the Affordable Connectivity Program. I just recently was voted in to join the Board of Directors for Addison Housing Works, and was appointed by the Governor to the Vermont State Housing Authority's Board of Commissioners... and am in the process to join the board for CSAC. I also do some volunteer work at CSAC. So I'm getting a chance to give back, and gain some

understanding of how things work from the other side of the equation.

I was born in Burlington, raised in Essex Junction. Went to Champlain College to get an Associate's Degree. Worked briefly as a contractor for the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. Moved to Arizona for 16 years, worked for what eventually became JPMorgan & Chase as we know it today. And I'm a novice ukulele player.

Anyway, I'm curious to learn if there is possibility some way I can help. I do have time, and physical limitations. But even if it's just sharing my experiences to provide some insight, I'd be willing to learn more and see if this is a fit for everyone involved.

I look forward to your reply. Feel free to ask any questions you may have.

Thank you,

Bryan Plant II  
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Hi, Good Morning.

For the record: I am Bryan Plant II from Bristol VT. I was born in Burlington and raised in Chittenden County. I graduated highschool in Essex Jct., and then graduated with an Associates Degree from Champlain College. I have worked in retail, home healthcare, as a contractor for the US Immigration & Naturalization Service, and ultimately as an Occupancy Analyst for JPMorgan Chase. I am a son, a brother, an uncle, and a friend to many. I am a writer, an artist, a nerd, and a novice ukulele player.

From late October 2020 thru mid August 2021 I lived at the John Graham Shelter in Vergennes. This was followed by 2 years in transitional housing, through the SRO program, from August 2021 until September 2023. On September 1st, 2023 I successfully leased up a newly built apartment in Bristol.

At the time I entered the shelter, I believed that this was the lowest point in my life. Boy, was I wrong. Just prior to entering the shelter, an acquaintance of a good friend, familiar with the system, helped me start the mountain of paperwork required to acquire services. The plan prior to moving into the shelter was this acquaintance would run point (volunteering her time), and the shelter staff would provide support. That did not happen, after a week I was essentially ghosted... the paperwork we filled out was never submitted. After wasting 2 months, it was finally cleared up, and I had to start over from scratch. This also began the process of regular changes with service coordinators. If you count the initial advocate, I'm now on #11 (in 3 years). This is not unique for people experiencing homelessness.

It was around that same time that I began to try to access the Federal Government's Lifeline Program for free cell phone service. Vermont is serviced by QLink. Their actions forced me to go without a phone for months, and they wouldn't help me when I didn't have coverage. This took close to 6 months to resolve - a huge barrier to keeping up with appointments and services.

In late January/early February 2021 I was presented with the opportunity to participate in the Single Room Occupancy or SRO program, which provides a path to obtaining a Housing Choice/Section 8 voucher. This would be my first experience with filling out VSHA paperwork. I filled out the 20+ page application and provided financial information as requested. In April I was asked to refresh the financial information... which included filling out the application, in full, for a second time. About 2 months later I heard back that I was accepted into the program. The lack of timeframes and communication was problematic... let alone the time it took. When months go by, it's easy if you're dealing with something like depression for doubt, despair, and hopelessness to set in. The system has let us down so many times, why should we believe it won't now?

I said earlier that I thought moving into the shelter was the lowest point in my life. I was wrong, it would be August 25th, 2021. This was the day of my disability hearing... and my move to my SRO unit. The hearing was grueling because your life is laid bare for people to sift through all the worst things about your life, confirming them... while others are actively trying to deny you

assistance. This experience nearly broke me. I was then unceremoniously moved to my SRO unit, without contact from any of my support network for several days. These were people I had depended on, who knew how hard this was for me, knew how poor my health was... my limited ability to get around... thought I had built connections with... I was left to flounder for several days.

Thankfully I made it through the initial move in period. I could go on about various programs that were supposed to help with one thing or another (example furniture), but fell short. I did receive VERAP and ultimately I was fortunate with the decision on my disability case... But with a favorable decision, came losing some benefits. The Fed giveth, and the state taketh away. I was able to keep Medicaid during the COVID emergency order, it helped greatly with covering my many medications, counseling appointments, physical therapy, and durable medical equipment. With the rescinding of the emergency order, I am no longer eligible for Medicaid. I have already begun to see my concerns come to life. The copays for counseling alone force me to go less often. Additionally, in losing Medicaid, I am no longer eligible for phone service through the Lifeline Program.

Over the course of the next two years while trying to get my life back on track, every few months it seemed like some agency or another needed paperwork filled out. Someone actually needs to read through the questions, because many are often unclear... especially when a person is worried that one wrong answer can get them dropped from a program... and the long wait to possibly get benefits restored. It strikes me that it is so confusing that even service coordinators get them wrong or are stumped by them. This is made even worse by the unrealistic turnaround request times. If I never see another 10 day required response request, it will be too soon. That's received, not postmarked. The request often shows up 4 days after it's dated/printed... which gives a person roughly 24 to 48 hours to gather the info, and get it back in the mail. Service coordinators are rarely available to meet on such short notice, due to their caseloads... and if multiple clients receive the same requests, somebody gets left in the cold. The fear/stress/panic/anxiety that this evokes in the many, many clients who struggle with mental illness echoes for days & weeks. Trust me, you have no idea how much damage this does to people. It's especially insulting when the response packet then sits on a desk for weeks or even months. This is not acceptable, it is an area that I hope you will look at.

As stated earlier, I am successfully housed as of September. My Section 8 voucher almost didn't get extended. For those unfamiliar with the SRO program, a person accepted into the program spends a year in a transitional living space, and at the end of 1 year, if they are in good standing, become eligible for Section 8. Currently it is the ONLY clear path for many to receive assistance and available in only limited places. At the end of my year, I was deemed no longer eligible for the subsidy at the location I was living. I could stay there paying full rent on the space, but VSHA would provide no assistance. I was also informed that I would have only 6 months to use the voucher or lose it, in other words treated like, if I didn't find a place, I was doing something wrong... and that it might be possible to receive a short extension. Anyone familiar with the housing situation in Vermont knows how limited the supply is, how high the rents are, and how dire the situation truly is. I conducted my search, but was having very

little success in this effort. In November 2022, via my service coordinator (#9 for those keeping track) began to reach out to VSHA to make the extension process easier, the 6 month period was set to end Jan 30, 2023.

We reached out 5 times, before receiving a brief response asking who this request was for... even though my name was clearly provided multiple times. The holidays occurred, to which we reached out 5 more times before the deadline. We reached out 8 more times before getting a response in late March. In April I received a letter telling me I was terminated from the program due to inactivity, but could request an appeal. I requested an appeal, only to follow up with VSHA to have them tell me they felt a hearing was unnecessary unless my financial situation had changed. I then had to fire back that they kept dodging my questions, that I had spent months trying to get answers to... they kept referencing stuff I already knew, and that if a hearing was the only way to get heard... I demanded one. VSHA reluctantly agreed to have a hearing.

Prior to the hearing, I provided them with cell phone call logs (date/number/time) and all email correspondence. 15 minutes before the hearing, I received a hearing cancellation notice, and an email with a soft apology... reinstating me back into the program... with them needing... updated financials and the filling out of another 20+ page questionnaire. I want to be clear, this is not an uncommon story. If I didn't keep fighting and keep those records, I might not be housed today. How is someone going through their worst days, facing challenges whether it's substance use disorder, trauma, or mental health roadblocks... if their service coordinators are not bringing their "A game"... going to get the help they need? And why are people who are experiencing this always held to a higher standard, than providers, state agencies and others? They can miss deadlines, we cannot. They can lose paperwork, we cannot.

I've somehow made it through. Mine is a success story. Unfortunately, the problem of homelessness is not going away. It cannot be ignored. I've returned to Montpelier today to try and finish bookending that chapter in my life, to give it some meaning while I figure what comes next. If able, I'd still like to return in some capacity to being a productive member of society. Since I was last here I've conducted interviews with the VT Housing & Conservation Board, the VT Food Bank, & Addison Housing Works. I've submitted letters of intent to join the board of directors for 2 orgnations, likely to be made official by mid year. Additionally I intend to participate in Mental Health Awareness later this month and I continue to do some volunteer work with the Counseling Service of Addison County. I do not consider myself an advocate, but it's certainly a path unfolding before me should I take it. I do hope by continuing to share my experiences, it lands in the ears of those that need to hear it. That instead of pulling up the ladder behind me, the process gets smoother and less painful for those who still have nowhere to go.

I appreciate your time. Thank you.

My name is Bryan Plant II from Bristol, VT.

While my mental health has been a lifelong struggle, the road back began in 2018. A simple routine visit with my doctor was an unintended first step. He asked the simple question, "how are you doing?" Apparently that was all I needed to break down uncontrollably sobbing, as I couldn't take it any longer. I had troubles, and needed a way out... I needed help.

For many years I had been sliding into a deep depression, fed by anxiety and insecurities... narrated by an unrelenting inner critic. Always ready to remind of all the worst things I believed about myself, to delight in the smallest mistake, and ruin/diminish any reason I might have to celebrate. Why wouldn't I believe this messenger, those blows were in my own voice.

I've always struggled with my weight. I've struggled w/ low self... well everything. Self Esteem, Self Worth, Self Image, and the new one I'm learning about... Self Love. I've often struggled w/ Social Anxiety. When all you want to do is hide, or at least blend in... it's extremely hard to do when you're my size. Apparently the discomfort wasn't great enough to encourage me to make the necessary changes, it was just easier to start hiding away. I'm eternally grateful for the friends & family that wouldn't let me. Unfortunately it wasn't enough.

A vicious loop began dragging me down. I would exaggerate even the smallest piece of negative feedback. Everytime I would be rejected in romantic attempts, it became a harsh judgment on my value as a human. It eventually became easier to reject myself. I was unfulfilled with my work, but the pay was good... I felt stuck, so I endured the frustration. As my weight went up, I shrank my world until there wasn't much left. And then... I was laid off.

Losing my job hit me hard, I lost a sense of identity. Denying the shock to the system, and underlying depression began to hinder my efforts to find a new job. It didn't take long before the fear of losing my home became a reality. I luckily sold it before it was foreclosed on... but I had to make the decision to move back home to regroup. But in my head, it was as: a failure, a loser... worthless. I was supposed to be stronger, better, tougher than this. I clearly was not.

I half heartedly tried to find work, I tried to find my way back... all I was doing was spinning my wheels, sinking further into the muck. I bled my 401K dry to have something to live off, and I lived off the generosity of others for a few years. But these were just slowing the descent... that ultimately landed me in a homeless shelter.

I thought that was the lowest point in my life, a reality shock to the system. It still took another year to hit what I consider my true rock bottom. I struggled immensely between my mental health, my physical health, and now difficulties navigating the complexities of the government social services programs. It was a slogfest. I felt under constant threat. I battled through too many barriers... including my own biases & beliefs. I compounded it by making the decision to do this unmedicated.

That's not a judgment on those who need the tool of medication. I had avoided facing how I truly felt about things for so long, that... to come back... I needed to break that habit. I needed to become open to trying new things, even if I thought they were too touchy feely. What I was doing hadn't been working, maybe someone else knew a different or better way. I'll probably continue to apologize to the people at CSAC for pushing back against all the soft language that many, many 3 letter systems employ. I'd literally have to take handouts and slides home to reread, and put into my own words to have any chance to land/resonate. Additionally, in making some good friends from my peers it has made all the difference. They listened when I needed to vent, which was often. I learned I wasn't alone.

Today, a few long... so very long years later... I'm in a better, more consistent/stable place. I've successfully come out of homelessness. My health still presents its challenges, but everything is trending in the right direction for a change. The light at the end of the tunnel is looking bright.

I'm here today for many reasons. I think we need to share stories of our successes, and the stories of our pain. In spite of my anxiety, I found the strength to sit in front of legislators. In spite of my struggles, I try to find opportunities to volunteer. And while I'm not an advocate, I'm finding ways to get a seat at the table to maybe help others have an easier go of things. I've even found a way to make some time to start learning the ukulele.

I believe we all have something to offer. Don't forget it, even if it's hard to believe. Better days are ahead if one is brave enough to fight for them, even if the fight that day is getting out of bed. Seek out the support you need. If the people around you aren't helping... seek out those who help you be your best self. You have to want it. It won't be easy, but it is worth it.

For a long time... I believed I was trapped in a prison of my own making, in my mind with depression & anxiety. And while there's work to continue, I'm turning the tide. Depression & Anxiety aren't going anywhere, I understand they will very likely be with me the rest of my days. But now, they are trapped in my mind with ME! I'm winning. My future looks more optimistic, brighter. I wish this for those involved today, and those who could not be. Don't give up.