Introduction statement – House Bill 594

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Rutland City – 5

Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to introduce H.594 The Temporary Emergency Housing and Accountability Program and Return Home / Family Unification Program.

The status quo reflects a belief that the most compassionate response to homelessness is to keep emergency housing available for as long as it is needed, even when the system cannot offer structure, services, or a clear path forward. It prioritizes immediate harm reduction but tolerates long-term instability, isolation, and public invisibility in the name of avoiding challenging decisions. The underlying value is that preventing disruption today is more important than designing a system that reliably produces stability tomorrow.

H.594 The Temporary Emergency House and Accountability Program and Return Home Program (Familly Reunification) reflects a belief that compassion includes responsibility, structure, and honesty about what works. It values emergency housing as a critical safety net, but not as a permanent living arrangement, and insists that public systems should help people move forward rather than simply contain crisis. The underlying value is that dignity is not just shelter tonight, but progress toward a stable life.

Under the status quo, responsibility is diffuse and largely unspoken. Individuals are not asked to engage consistently because the system cannot reliably deliver services, and the system itself is rarely held accountable because decisions are made through emergency extensions and executive discretion. The value implicit here is avoidance of conflict, even if that avoidance leads to stagnation and rising costs.

Under H.594, responsibility is explicit and shared. The State is required to provide capacity, staffing, accommodations, and due process and individuals are expected to engage where they are able, When the system fails, people are protected from penalty, and the Legislature receives data and corrective action plans. The value here is fairness—clear expectations paired with real safeguards.

The status quo values flexibility through informality. Because obligations, commitments and responsibilities are minimal, decisions can be made quickly in crisis, but outcomes vary widely by geography, provider, and moment in time. That flexibility comes at the cost of predictability, transparency, and public trust.

H594 values flexibility through structure. It sets up clear tiers, time horizons, and placement standards while allowing movement between them based on need, responstivity and capacity. This approach values consistency and transparency without rigidity (Inflexability)

Under the status quo, hotels and motels are treated as a necessary long-term solution despite being isolating, expensive, and poorly connected to services. The value embedded here is expedience—using what is available rather than building what is effective.

Under H.594, hotels are recognized as a temporary tool of last resort. The bill values investing in shelters, housing, and workforce capacity even when that requires deliberate transition and oversight. The value is effectiveness over convenience.

The status quo keeps homelessness in a constant state of political emergency. Decisions are revisited annually, often under pressure, and protections that should be settled remain subject to debate. The value here is short-term stability in the political moment, even if long-term uncertainty persists.

H.594 values democratic governance over perpetual crisis. By setting a sunset, requiring reporting, and defining outcomes, it allows future decisions to be made based on evidence rather than urgency. The value is accountability to both people in crisis and the public.

The contrast is this: the status quo prioritizes endurance, while H.594 prioritizes progress. The status quo keeps people housed but often stuck. H.594 keeps people safe while insisting the system be better and do better, rather than standing still.

At its heart, H.594 is about restoring balance to a system that has drifted away from Vermont values on all sides. Most of us believe three things at the same time: that people in crisis deserve dignity and safety, that public systems should help people move forward, and that taxpayers deserve honesty about what is working and what is not. This bill attempts to hold all three of those values together instead of choosing one at the expense of the others.

Right now, our emergency housing system asks extraordinarily little of the system itself and ends up asking too much of everyone else—neighbors, municipalities, first responders, and the people stuck inside it. Leaving people indefinitely in motels without structure or services isn't kindness, and it isn't conservative or progressive; it is avoidance. This bill says we can be humane without being hands-off, and accountable without being punitive.

For colleagues who worry about compassion, the bill locks in protections that don't depend on who's in office or what the politics are that year. Cold-weather shelter is still universal. Survivors of domestic violence stay protected. Disability is defined broadly, accommodations are required, and people are not reprimanded for incapacity or system failures. Those are not negotiable add-ons; they are core features written into statute.

For colleagues who worry about responsibility and stewardship, the bill finally draws honest lines. Emergency housing is temporary. Expectations are clear. Hotels are not a long-term solution. Time limits exist, but they are realistic and pause when the system can't deliver. Accountability applies to the State as much as to the individual. That's not ideology—that's governance.

For those concerned about politics, this bill deliberately takes homelessness out of the constant emergency cycle. It sunsets. It requires reporting. It measures outcomes instead of intentions. That gives future legislatures, regardless of party, the ability to adjust based on evidence rather than opinion.

Most importantly, this bill respects the people we're trying to help by refusing to trap them in a system that goes nowhere. Dignity isn't just a warm room tonight; it's a path forward tomorrow. A system that stabilizes without transitioning is not neutral—it quietly gives up on people. This bill says Vermont shouldn't do that.

You don't have to believe this bill is perfect to believe it's more honest than what we're doing now. It doesn't ask us to abandon compassion or accountability. It asks us to stop pretending we can have one without the other.

In short, the bill lays the foundation for a phased transition: first stabilize the system with clear tiers, funding, and oversight; then expand regional autonomy as capacity and performance metrics mature. This approach reduces risk while honoring the long-term goal of community-led solutions.

Vermont's homelessness crisis demands both immediate stabilization and long-term structural reform. H.91 envisioned a decentralized, community-led system under VHEARTH, shifting control to regional agencies and other housing/human services partners. While that approach aligns with best practices for local responsiveness, its implementation faced concerns about readiness, oversight, and funding predictability. H594 offers a pragmatic middle ground: it sets up a clear statewide framework with tiered housing options, accountability measures, and substantial appropriations to expand shelter and permanent housing capacity. These elements address the infrastructure gaps and governance risks that hindered H.91's rollout.

By embedding strong oversight, time limits, case management, and performance reporting, H. 594 creates a stable foundation for systemic change. At the same time, it is highly amendable to incorporate regional flexibility, mobile outreach, and community-based pilots—features central to H.91's philosophy. In effect, this bill builds the operational and housing capacity that H.91 assumed would exist, while phasing in local control under measurable standards. Over time, we can use the bill's structure to transition toward full regional administration, ensuring that decentralization occurs only after systems, staffing, and housing stock are in place.

In short, H. 594 is not a competing vision but a sequenced approach: first stabilize and scale with accountability, then evolve toward community-led governance. I believe this bridge strategy reduces risk, accelerates capacity-building, and positions Vermont to achieve H.91's long-term goals without repeating past implementation challenges.

In essence, H.594 aligns with Vermont's fiscal and policy goals: spend smarter, not just more**,** and ensure emergency housing stays a bridge—not a destination—on the path to affordable, permanent homes