Executive Order Targets Housing to Homeless Families

BURLINGTON, VT – On April 20, when Governor Peter Shumlin signed an Executive Order ensuring that at least 15% of publicly funded housing go to homeless families and individuals, Summer Rivers of Vergennes was by his side to explain just how much his action was needed.

“It’s hard to stay positive, work full time, and raise a family without a home,” Summer said. “The Executive Order will broaden the opportunity for me to find a home of my own. People need a chance to succeed, and I believe what the Governor is doing today is a big step in the right direction,” she said.

“What this executive action does is say to the publicly supported housing [institutions] in Vermont, 15 percent of your units must be dedicated to giving homeless people a place to live,” Shumlin said. “The challenge is that families come into shelters, then they’re ready to move, and they simply cannot find housing. This Order is taking a smarter, more cost effective approach to ending homelessness,” he said.

“We lost our home when our living situation became unsafe for us,” Rivers, a mother of three sons explained. “Throughout our period of homelessness, I kept my full-time job in the healthcare field. I recently took on more responsibility which earned me a promotion. But even still, when I feel like I’m doing everything I can to be successful, I am surprised at just how hard it is to find a place to live.”
rent. There are very few units available. We almost had a place recently, but the private landlord decided to offer it to someone else. We keep trying,” she said.

“Housing families and individuals is not only the morally right thing to do,” said Michael Monte, Chief Operating and Financial Officer at Champlain Housing Trust. “It will also have a significant impact on our communities’ health, the ability of children to learn, and the productivity of our workers,” he said.

“There is a stigma attached to homelessness,” Rivers explained. “We did not choose to lose our housing to begin with — nobody does — but it came with a real sense of shame. Children don’t want others to know that they have no place of their own,” she said. “It’s embarrassing, and sometimes they don’t want to go to school. It can really set a child back as a student. All the staff at the John Graham Shelter helped us a lot. I can’t tell you how much it means to have support at a time like this. But what can you do when there is no place to rent?” she asked.

“There is a stigma attached to homelessness… when I feel like I’m doing everything I can to be successful, I am surprised at just how hard it is to find a place to rent…”

“Throughout our period of homelessness, I kept my full-time job in the healthcare field.”
John Graham Board Member Wins Newman Fellowship for Service to Homeless

In April, Daniel Adamek, a member of the Board of John Graham Housing and Services (JGHS) and a sophomore at Middlebury College, was named a Newman Civic Fellow for his work with homeless families and individuals.

The award honors "inspiring college student leaders who have demonstrated an investment in finding solutions for challenges facing communities throughout the country. Through service, research, and advocacy, Newman Civic Fellows are making the most of their college experiences to better understand themselves, the root causes of social issues, and effective mechanisms for creating lasting change."

Dan served at JGHS as a Shepherd Poverty Intern during the summer of 2015.

“Dan is a student leader invested in the issue of access to safe housing as a basic human right,” said Middlebury College President Laurie Patton in recommending Dan for the fellowship. “He offers a calm and empathetic presence while helping low-income individuals and families attain safe housing.”

“Dan has meant a lot to residents and staff alike,” said Elizabeth Ready, Director of JGHS. “He was an excellent service coordinator, spending time with outreach clients and helping people find work and apartments to rent. This winter, he cultivated a significant number of donors and participants in the second annual Sleep-Out to End Homelessness. He continues to serve John Graham and Addison County with frequent visits in his current role on the Board,” she said.

This summer, Dan will be working with homeless and street-active queer and trans youth at the Boston-based non-profit Youth on Fire, a harm reduction project of the AIDS Action Committee.

Thanks Dan, for your kind heart and commitment to justice and equality.

Children enjoy the beautiful spring weather!
Brandon's Story

I never had a lot of structure growing up. When I was a child, before I was adopted, we were always going from house to house. We couldn’t stay because we weren’t paying rent. Quite a few times, we were in homeless shelters. Being that age, I didn’t think much of it—just, “okay, we’re going to this place now.”

As I got older, it started to sink in. My parents where into a lot of stuff behind closed doors. They couldn’t buy us food and clothes because they were always in debt, spending too much on this stuff they didn’t need. They were always around, but they were never there.

I had a really rough childhood in that sense. But, that’s the past and all you can do is move forward.

My brothers were the only ones I could rely on and cared about. My father went to jail and we were taken into foster care, separately. That was the hardest point in my life—not being able to see my brothers for two years. Eventually, I was put into another long-term foster home, which meant it could be years before I saw my brothers.

My family asked if they could adopt me, and I gave one condition—that, “you have to get my brothers here with me, too.” I wasn’t going anywhere without them. So, they requested their transfer into the foster home. Within a year, we were adopted, all on the same day.

Recently, I found myself living from place to place to place, always finding a job while at that next place, but never being able to hold it long enough to save up and make it on my own. Before calling the Shelter, I was living in Burlington. When I lost my job, I felt stuck. I heard about the John Graham Shelter and thought “why not?” This could be a great opportunity to get back on my feet. Not even 24 hours later, they called me up and said “hey, can you come down today?”

I started making progress immediately. After a few days of job searching, I thought, “I really want to join the military. Why am I not pursuing that right now?” So, I got a recruiter, and within a week I was headed out to enlist. In a few weeks I’ll be in basic training. I’m super excited about it.

I chose the army because they work with technology, which I love. They have a position as an IT specialist, which will help the transition back into civilian life. I can get a good job with good pay.

Being here, they sit down, listen, work with you. They help with what you want to get done, which is absolutely amazing. You just don’t find help like that. That gave me the power and confidence to complete any task.
Tijuana's Story

About eight years ago is when I got sick. It started in my left eye. It went black and I couldn’t see. I stayed in the hospital five days, had to get steroids, but my eyesight came back. Then, my legs started getting weaker and weaker. I stayed in the hospital for a month. When I got out, I was determined to get out of the wheelchair. It was hard work—physical therapy, exercise every day—but now I can walk.

Becoming disabled ended with me losing my housing. Originally, I had a voucher for my house in Burlington—a three-bedroom with my kids. After being diagnosed with MS, my sister started taking care of my kids, and I was only allowed a one-bedroom apartment. The rent got too high for me to pay it. I lost my voucher and became homeless, which was especially tough in the wintertime.

I went back and forth between different shelters. I started in the Burlington shelter COTS for a while. Then they put me up in the Middlebury shelter [Charter House] for three nights before I came to the John Graham Shelter. Nothing is like here. [Elsewhere] they only let you in at night. It’s locked during the day. You have to find a place from 9 to 6 o’clock.

[My service coordinator] Nancy is very helpful. She’s there when I need her. And when she’s not there, I can call Pete, or even Elizabeth. Everyone is very helpful. Nancy and Elizabeth worked their fingers to the bone to get my voucher back. Now I have my own place. I appreciate it, too.

Nancy’s also the one who got me McKayla from TLC [Homecare and Nursing]. McKayla is very helpful. She’s more of a friend than a companion. She helps me clean, helps me do laundry, helps me with mail. And, we made a bucket list together.

I’m most proud of my kids. I have two boys and a girl. The youngest is graduating this June and wants to open her own beauty salon. She’s good with hair and studies cosmetology. My two sons are autistic. The younger one loves music, but don’t ask him to sing! The older one loves to take things apart and put them back together again. They have learning disabilities, but overcame them and work now.

“They worked their fingers to the bone. I appreciate it, too.”
Jonathan McGrath, Night Manager

I joined the John Graham Shelter team as a night manager at the beginning of March 2016. As soon as the opening appeared online, I called. A month later, I’m still in disbelief at my luck!

My main responsibility at the Shelter is to ensure resident safety and wellbeing at night. I greet those coming back from work, hang out in the kitchen while people cook supper, and help things get quiet so folks can get a good rest. I’m always the last to bed and the first to rise, so I keep a watchful eye for anything that may emerge overnight. Usually things are peaceful, but on the off chance that a situation surfaces, I remain in close contact with the Shelter management team and emergency services.

My path to the Shelter has been long and winding. I’m a native of Vermont, but my career and curiosity has led me all along the Eastern Seaboard. I have worked as a puppeteer, a hairdresser, a piano restorer, a crew manager, a merchant seaman, and much, much more. This is the first big opportunity I’ve taken to really give back to my community.

I feel deeply about the work we do because I have experienced homelessness, too. As a young man without roots to where I was working, I’d often rely on the kindness of strangers for shelter. You can’t always expect when your life is about to transition. In fact, I was couch-surfing just prior to joining the staff, and I now live at the JGH&S Green Street location.

I’m honored to work with such a dedicated and talented team in such a supportive atmosphere!