

George Flannery: December Public Comment GA Emergency Housing Task Force

I am George Flannery and this is the second public comment that I am writing to the GA Emergency Housing Task Force. In my first comment I talked about how scared I was about what would happen to me when my 80 days ran out. I rely on 100% oxygen and now am in multiple organ failure, emphysema and COPD. I wanted to comment again because I think that it is important to know what did happen and what living outside can do to people.

I don't know how I did not die, my health declined significantly. Before the 80 days ran out, I was on oxygen, but, I could do normal activities and though I would sometimes end up in the hospital, my likelihood of surviving this illness was higher. So, I am not sure that I can say that I did survive it, because the reality is that it accelerated my illness in a way that I can only hope that I can fight.

In the last 60 days, my health declined. Several times my oxygen dipped into the low 60s, last week it dipped into the 50s and on Friday, it went as low as 48. Living outside was causing me to slowly suffocate. I don't want to be dramatic or extreme, but what happened was extreme.

I stayed in touch with End Homelessness Vermont throughout my time outside, they have helped me with my voucher since I got sick. On November 18th, EHVT started trying to find me a room that could accommodate my needs to pre book for December 1st. They turned over every stone and could not find something that worked.

At this point, I need a liver transplant and have an incredibly restrictive diet or it can not be done. I can only walk 15 feet and the oxygen tank that I had been using no longer is enough, a regular portable machine will not be enough anymore. I am not going to a nursing facility, because I have the care I need, but I need to be inside. I am only 48 years old, this only started in late 2023 and I still have a chance at survival. I don't want to die.

I need shelter on the first floor, I need access to a kitchenette for my diet and I need to be close to my medical providers who are all in Rutland. After many days of trying to find something that would work for my disability, my authorized representative asked DCF for a reasonable accommodation, just as she had in September when my 80 days ran out. Only this time, she just asked so that I could use a hotel room that had been "taken off line" but was available, one that met all my needs. One that was on the first floor, had a kitchenette and is right across the street from my primary care doctor who I have to see frequently and close to the Rutland Regional Medical Center. That request for a reasonable accommodation was denied.

I would have taken something not perfect to get inside, but I was not offered anything. I opted to go to a fair hearing and ask for my request to be approved. We had an emergency preliminary hearing. I am attaching the results of that hearing to my public comment because it better explains my situation than I can. With so little oxygen, I am unable to say much.

The experience of going to the fair hearing was extremely stressful. It happened in 3 hearing times. The third, last Friday, December 12th. Only when the Human Services Board called me, they did not reach me. That is because I had passed out. My caregiver came to find me outside, in the passenger seat of a car and I was incoherent.

Ultimately the Human Services Board found in my favor for that preliminary hearing. But, I never should have had to go through that. My doctor had written a note that had already been submitted to ESD, I should not have been questioned about the validity of my health. The hearing felt harsh and I was not able to think completely straight because of my condition, I was lucky that I had someone representing me. The preliminary decision showed a Department policy that had not been followed in my case. It is one that I know is right by the American With Disabilities Act and one that with a few small changes would ensure that people like me had a better chance of survival outside.

I saw the news of people dying outside a few weeks ago and I was sure that was going to be me. I know that my case is extreme, but I also know that I am not alone. And it is important for people to understand that before I was sick, I did work at the hotels. I saw so many people with many different kinds of disabilities. Their needs might be different than mine, but they deserve to have those needs met, disabilities have a broad range and have different needs. Reasonable Accommodations are not just for people in wheelchairs, I think that it is important to understand that. There are people with schizophrenia, people with severe depression, people with high risk pregnancies, people with severe asthma, people who use walkers, all of whom might be at significant risk and have specific needs, some with disabilities that you can't see. Not all needs can be met, but when they can, that should be default. People have to fight way too hard to get what they need, instead of being supported. There are many reasons that people need an accommodation.

In my case not only was it possible to meet my need, there was a room that met my needs sitting empty in a hotel that was being used for other people who need reasonable accommodations even though the hotel had been taken offline. There was a hotel with almost 40 empty rooms, many on the ground floor that would not have had a kitchenette, but, would have gotten me out of the cold and I was not even offered that. I felt like my life was not valuable and couldn't understand why.

After the finding and just before my final fair hearing yesterday, DCF changed course and decided to allow my accommodation as had been decided in the preliminary hearing. Thankfully, because I am not sure that I could go through another hearing with such low oxygen.

I hope that the committee will consider recommending that people remain sheltered until they are permanently housed. I was not sick like this 18 months ago, it happened suddenly. It could happen to anyone. I also hope that people will take a look at that preliminary finding and see that there is a need for specific recommendations about disabilities because without it, we are not heard and our needs are not being met. Please listen to those who work with people with disabilities and those of us who have them. I hope that I am well enough to testify in the

legislature when this is being considered, but in case I am not, please make these recommendations so that what happened to me will not happen to others.

Thank you all for your time, your hard work and your dedication. I know that none of this is easy and you are all trying your best. Please just remember to listen to those of us living it as you consider what is next.