March 8, 2022

To: Governor Phil Scott
   Vermont State Senate
   Vermont House of Representatives

Dear Lawmakers,

We know you are already aware of an impending eviction of two dozen families here in Winooski at a multi-unit property at 300 Main Street. The property owner is preparing to evict all tenants of 24 apartments as of July 1 to accommodate renovations; once renovations are complete, the landlord intends to convert this apartment complex to market rate units, unaffordable to most Winooski residents.

Finding affordable housing in Winooski is challenging under the best of circumstances, and in particular for our Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) neighbors. The lack of access to homeownership and stable housing for BIPOC is no accident. In the United States policies such as exclusionary zoning, discriminatory lending and real estate practices and other tools of systemic racism prevent BIPOC from accessing the same housing opportunities as white community members. Vermont hasn’t been immune: white Vermonters are almost three times more likely to be homeowners than Black ones. The result is fewer BIPOC households have an opportunity to experience the security that safe and stable housing brings.

Most of the families residing at 300 Main Street are low income; the majority are BIPOC and refugee families. It will likely be impossible for these economically disadvantaged, multigenerational families to find new housing in the next four months, and even more impossible to find housing that is large enough to meet their needs.

If these families are forced to leave their homes, many won’t be able to stay in Winooski. The 29 school-age children who currently call 300 Main Street home won’t be able to continue attending Winooski schools. This displacement will tear these families away from their friends and neighbors, the school that supports them, stores and services they know, and accessible public transportation.

Throughout Vermont, we are experiencing a housing crisis that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. With vacancy rates already at an unhealthy low, and an influx of out of state and investor home purchases, housing prices and rents are soaring. In Winooski, our public housing authority is finding that families who receive a section 8 voucher for housing cannot find units for rent within the price and size limits for the voucher. The lack of available, affordable housing is especially stark for large, multi-generational families; for those families who are over the benefits cliff, finding naturally occurring affordable housing is nearly impossible.

Vermont considers itself a welcoming place for refugees, but we need to do more than just open our arms. We need to make sure our new residents have access to safe, affordable housing that allows them to live with dignity. Refugee service providers have long struggled to find adequate housing; many refugee families are multi-
generational, and 3, 4- and 5-bedroom units are necessary to safely house them. In the current market, it is challenging to find even 2-bedroom units.

While the market may show that smaller units are in demand, our housing authorities show that families waiting for larger units are on wait lists twice as long. Large units are developed primarily by non-profit housing organizations reliant on government grants, tax credits and private donations to make the projects financially viable, and this housing is not being built nearly fast enough to keep up with demand. State regulations also restrict the use of living rooms as bedrooms, further challenging the ability of larger families to find homes in our existing housing stock.

We know many of you share our commitment to addressing Vermont’s housing crisis. But investments in housing to meet this crisis must be coupled with requirements to ensure that mass displacements like the one underway in Winooski do not happen. Residents have little recourse when private landlords determine that economic conditions favor displacement and increasing rents.

If private developers are going to be the recipients of substantial public funds, then we should ensure that adequate, permanent safeguards are in place to prevent displacement of residents once the project is built and subsidies or tax credits expire. The state program that provides rehab money to landlords to house displaced, homeless people, should also qualify refugees in that group to encourage more landlords to rent to New American families.

While the situation at 300 Main Street is tragic, we know it is not unique. Time and again, we have seen landlords renovate units and raise rents, displacing economically disadvantaged families. This practice disproportionately affects members of the BIPOC community and oftentimes is rooted in racism.

Vermont needs a strategy to protect and preserve naturally-occurring affordable housing in communities. Vermont needs requirements to ensure that if relocation is necessary to perform renovations, tenants are provided with adequate notice, and assistance with relocation. This assistance should include identification of alternative housing, resources for moving expenses, and temporary assistance with covering increased rents.

If Vermont wants to commit to welcoming refugees and to making progress towards greater equity, we must invest in housing that is safe and affordable for families of all sizes. The open market is not going to support the creation of housing that meets the needs of the families we want to welcome. Vermont must make a substantial public investment in the creation of larger, affordable housing.

Our organizations are collectively working together to support the affected residents of 300 Main Street. We are requesting your immediate assistance to help target state housing policy and resources to better meet the needs of our community, and in particular, the families facing displacement, in order to prevent the housing crisis from doing further harm to the most vulnerable in Winooski.

Sincerely,

Mayor Kristine Lott, City of Winooski
Tori Cleeland, Board Chair, Winooski School District
Deac Decarreau, Executive Director, Winooski Housing Authority
Amila Merdznovic, Executive Director, US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
Jacob Bogre, Executive Director, AALV
Paul Dragon, Executive Director, Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity
Michael Monte, CEO, Champlain Housing Trust