

To: House and Senate Appropriations Committees
From: The ACLU of Vermont
Re: FY24 State Budget
Date: 2/23/23

Dear House and Senate Appropriations Committees,

The ACLU of Vermont writes in response to your request for comments on the FY24 state budget. We look forward to working with the legislature, and our statewide partners in the coming year to advance strategies and solutions that meet the needs of our communities.



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For all our challenges, Vermont remains one of the safest states in the country, and we have made great progress enacting smarter, fairer criminal justice policies in recent years. In current discussions about public safety, however, we are seeing a growing emphasis on “tough on crime” approaches that data and experience have shown for decades to be ineffective in ensuring safety and justice in our communities.

The people of Vermont have consistently rejected the costly and ineffective approaches to public safety that have failed us for so long. [They want better strategies](#) that rely on proven, evidence-based policies and investments to prevent crime in the first place. **These include stronger investments in affordable housing, education, mental health and substance use services, and community-based alternatives to incarceration.**

By addressing the root causes of these public safety challenges, we can find real and lasting solutions. To that end, we ask that the state budget include increased investments in the following areas:

Housing: To address a sustained housing crisis, we need bold policy reform and long-term investments to address the severe shortage of affordable housing. The number of people without permanent shelter [doubled during the pandemic](#), vacancy rates are the lowest in the country, and people are turning down jobs in Vermont for lack of housing. The short-term investments and initiatives Vermont has pursued have not been up to the task. Clearly, we need to do [far more](#) to have an impact and ensure that Vermonters can have their basic needs met.

Mental health supports and services: We need to significantly expand funding for strategies that address Vermont’s growing mental health

crisis. [Burlington police alone reported](#) a ninety percent increase in mental health incidents over the past decade. This is not a challenge the police can or should be expected to solve. We need to invest in our existing mental health system and commit to funding innovative approaches to treatment, as well as mental health first responders who operate separately from law enforcement.

Substance abuse prevention and treatment: Every loss of life to substance use disorder is tragic, and more Vermonters died of overdoses in 2021 than ever before. As of last September, [we were outpacing those numbers in 2022](#)—evidence of an ongoing policy failure.

It is past time that we responded with the kind of [bold and compassionate ideas](#) Vermont is known for, including drug decriminalization, improvements and investments in our hub and spoke treatment system, emerging solutions like overdose prevention sites, and expanded availability of Narcan and Fentanyl testing strips that can prevent future deaths.

Community-based alternatives to incarceration: It is well known that many of Vermont’s prisons are outdated. Rather than investing millions of dollars in long-term construction projects that would significantly expand the footprint of Vermont’s prison system, we should instead fund community-based alternatives that better meet the needs of people involved in our criminal legal system and our communities and continue to reduce our costly overreliance on prisons through [smarter justice reforms](#).

Education: Vermont’s public education system is rightly a source of tremendous pride in our communities. Vermonters are deeply committed to ensuring that our public education system is well-funded, equitable, and rooted in democratic values. Unfortunately, the U.S. Supreme Court has jeopardized the Vermont traditions on which our public education system relies and threatens to undermine the common benefit provided to all Vermont students in our public education system.

We urge the legislature to support policy solutions that chart a path forward in compliance with a radical shift in Supreme Court precedent while upholding our core democratic values and traditions.

Thank you for your consideration of these priorities. We look forward to working with your administration, the legislature, and our statewide



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partners and supporters on the solutions that address the root causes of the many challenges facing our communities—including the needed investments and reforms that will keep our communities safe and equitable for all Vermonters.

Sincerely,

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