

Dear Madam Chair and House Committee Members,

It is my honor to speak here today. I speak on my behalf from experience working in the northeast kingdom for 4 years.

I currently work for Northeast Kingdom Human Services, a designated mental health agency, serving northern Vermont's Essex, Orleans, and Caledonia counties.

Right now, I am a full-time mental health counselor contracted to service students for Canaan Schools in Canaan, Vermont.

I provide services for all students from preschool through 12th grade.

One of the reasons I am speaking today is because I have a caseload of about 20 to 30 clients throughout the school year. Often, my waitlist is around 5 to 10 students, and even with another counselor helping out one day per week seeing around 7 to 8 students, we continue to have a waitlist.

Prior to me working here, the Canaan Schools counselor position was vacant for 5 years.

This should not be the case.

A way to fix this is incentivizing counselors to live and work in the rural parts of Vermont, such as Canaan.

For instance, New Hampshire gives an incentive to work for rural mental health agencies by offering to pay \$60,000 of federal student loans, in exchange for 3 to 5 years of work.

If Vermont offered a similar program, there would be an increase in the number of available counselors within a few years.

Another way to fix this issue would be to make the requirements for becoming a licensed counselor in Vermont more lenient.

For instance, I know someone who has attended nearly 10 years of schooling but was denied a license after practicing for nearly 3 years due to not having a CACREP accredited program. They now have to take another year of schooling to be able to take another test, to see if they will be accepted for licensing.

The reality is, this individual could have a private practice for youth and their families in the local state county where they reside, but they are not able to work without supervision, and they cannot open a private practice without an unrestricted license.

Leniency, and a case by case basis when it comes to licensing could free up some counselors to begin seeing youth and families, and reduce the caseload of therapists, not only in the northeast kingdom, but throughout the state.

By reducing requirements, but still providing yearly survey's to clients and their families, Vermont could ensure the standard of care is still the best it can be.

Finally, one of the hardest realities about Vermont is many people are moving away from Vermont, rather than to the state.

In the past decade, the population has declined, rather than grown. Especially in rural areas such as Canaan, Lemington, and surrounding towns.

This means people are not finding a reason to stay here. For the sake of the youth in Vermont, it's time to give them reasons to stay.

One way to help people stay is to request federal grants for more local activities such as a basketball court and a strength training facility. The closest gym to Canaan is located in Lancaster, New Hampshire, which is nearly 1 hour away, and community members are unable to use the Canaan high school gym due to safety and liability concerns.

Additionally, incentivizing small business owners to move their businesses to Vermont's rural communities, and giving yearly incentives for them to stay in rural communities would increase the amount of jobs available for youth and their families.

It would also be beneficial to seek out federal funding for more large-scale operations to move to Vermont's northeast kingdom, to encourage people to stay local and for new people to move into Vermont.

Recently, a factory with nearly 200 positions in Colebrook, New Hampshire closed its doors and 200 people became unemployed, overnight. This means people residing on the Vermont side, possibly in Canaan, became jobless. This should not be the case.

Having federal grants and funding to encourage large-scale job growth would provide locals in Vermont and New Hampshire with access to new job opportunities, allowing them to stay in the local area and reduce financial hardship.

Lastly, lowering property taxes as a whole would benefit the more rural communities. While I am not a math expert, I can see how Vermont's property taxes can easily cause people to shudder when considering a property purchase in Vermont.

Working with the local state government to lower property taxes would encourage people to see Vermont as an oasis, and a place where they want to raise children.

This would help the population of Vermont grow exponentially, and it would help all areas of Vermont, not just the northeast kingdom. As the property tax reduction would increase population growth, and decrease the need for high property taxes.

Incentivizing counselors to move to and work in Vermont, providing leniency for licensing, and encouraging job and population growth, are all ways to improve the mental health supports available to those in the forgotten areas of Vermont and Vermont as a whole.

It may seem unrelated to build a gym or add jobs, but the World Health Organization's recent study of Social Determinants of Mental Health would agree that lack of mental health supports, unemployment or underpaid work, and lack of enriching activities contribute to mental health disorders.

By having these resources, not only would we see an increase in jobs and opportunities for families and youths, we would also see a decrease in overall mental health disorders based on research showing how crucial these factors are to mental health.

These are all the ways I believe we can help reduce the likelihood that Vermont's mental health care becomes a reactive system, instead of a proactive one. As of right now, I am on the reactive side of mental health care more often than I would like to be, due to the high numbers of people needing services, but the lack of resources to service them.

I'll leave you with this to think about, as it is something weighing heavy on my mind today. This past week on Tuesday, the Canaan community lost a young man to death by suicide.

Death by suicide is the number one preventable death in the United States. Yet, it takes 132 lives every single day, and is one of the top 9 leading causes of death in people aged 10 to 64, this is according to the CDC.

This young man in Canaan, became part of a tragic statistic. A statistic we could help to reduce drastically in the northeast kingdom with an increase in counseling and other mental health support services.

My role as a counselor for the school does not cover me to go into the community and work through the difficult loss of this young man with the family.

This means the family may not receive any services or support from mental health professionals during this difficult time in their lives.

Unfortunately, so many people fall by the wayside when it comes to support and services in Vermont's northeast kingdom. It's time to change this.

We need jobs, we need counselors, we need help. I tell people all the time to speak up when it's necessary, so I am doing that here today. I'm hoping the legislators and lawmakers are willing to hear and understand how serious the need is for mental health support and services.

Irene Simons, M.A, CMHC