

**2025 Budget Testimony, Empty Arms Vermont**  
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To the House and Senate Appropriation Committees,

My name is Chelsea Levis and I direct Empty Arms Vermont, a nonprofit organization that provides peer support for families grieving pregnancy and infant loss. I am here today to ask you to support our FY25 budget request of \$40,000 in one-time funds.

Empty Arms was founded in 2021 and fills a gap in our system of care for families who have had a baby die in pregnancy and infancy. We know that 20 to 25% of pregnancies end in a loss, yet there have never been services available to support the critical need for these families.

What mental health services for pregnancy loss are available in Vermont are inadequate. There are no statewide funded supportive programs for perinatal loss. The latest annual Maternal Mortality Review Panel Report submitted by the Vermont Department of Health recognizes this shortfall, and specifically recommends that the state should address this need and “sustainably invest in statewide resources for pregnancy loss support through Empty Arms Vermont.”

While the Vermont Department of Health has provided some federal grant funding to support our work, we are asking legislators to consider the Review Panel’s recommendation and provide needed funds to allow our organization to continue this service to Vermont families.

Let us not underestimate the need for support after pregnancy and infant loss. This is a hidden grief that has major consequences if we don’t provide families support. Birthing people who experience loss in a pregnancy are 4 times more likely to have major depression and 7 times more likely to screen positive for PTSD. We know these individuals are at greater risks for substance abuse and suicidality because of perinatal mood anxiety disorders. In fact, we know from an extensive study that if these mental health issues are left unaddressed, it is estimated to cost the state of Vermont \$48 million in annual societal costs.

We believe our work is decreasing these costs by stepping in and providing timely assistance to grieving families. Outside of our peer-to-peer framework, individuals are either finding long wait times to see a mental health therapist, are seeking support outside of the state, or frankly are left alone without support. Many of you here are probably familiar with someone who has experienced pregnancy or infant loss. I personally came to this work as a peer after my son died in birth 10 years ago and had no ongoing community support in the area I lived in. One of our support group facilitators who lost a son shortly after birth said that she had finally “found her people” after 27 years in Vermont. It is not an experience that is easy for anyone to talk about, but we cannot let that get in the way of providing support to these families.

**The modest funding we request will strengthen and expand sustainability for Empty Arms Vermont, allowing us to help dozens of more families in need. I ask you to support our \$40,000 one-time funding request. Thank you.**

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