

Good morning, Senators and thank you for your time on a busy Friday here at the statehouse. For the record my name is Jesse Bridges CEO of United Way of Northwest Vermont. I am connected to your committee's work on multiple fronts as the leader of an organization focusing on community and population health, and particularly the social determinants of health. I also serve on the UVM Medical Center Board of Trustees and was recently elected Chair of the Board.

I know the early part of the session is filled with quick deadlines and LOTS of information coming at you from a variety of directions. I am here to today to offer our support and information, not to ask anything directly of you, perhaps a welcome change...

What is so unique about United Way is that it exists at the intersection of non-profits, business, government, and community. We get to see how everything, and everyone, is connected. United Ways exist and partner across all of Vermont's counties, cities, and towns. We cross urban, rural, big employers and small businesses, for profit and not for profit, state and local government, minimum wage earners and those more fortunate in their socio-economic status. We exist at that intersection because we truly believe that is where change can happen.

As I know you are aware the challenges we face in Vermont – from housing and food insecurity to flood recovery to increased mental health crises and substance misuse to workforce challenges and economic instability – all these challenges are overlapping and interconnected.

United Way helps every person in our community to access the resources and connections they need to succeed. We do this by supporting a variety of local organizations, running our own programs (more on that in a minute), engaging in advocacy and community education, and bringing people together from different sectors and walks of life.

Today my colleagues and I are in the card room providing information about our Working Bridges program – Working Bridges is a partnership between United Way and employers focused on giving employees the resources they need to gain, keep, and grow in stable employment. We do this by bringing human services support directly to the employee onsite at the workplace. Our program has been around for 17 years and now has 29 employer partners in manufacturing, health care, and higher education sectors across northern VT. Last year we served over 3,000 employees and thousands more had access to our services or got connected through a colleague or family member's use of our services. Access to resources and trusted relationships at work helps employees overcome life's challenges without having to miss work or leave their jobs.



United Way of
Northwest Vermont



I am speaking to you today to offer information that we have gathered through this work about what keeps employees off the fiscal cliff, what resources work and what systems need to change to help our neighbors achieve stability and thrive, to help Vermont employers retain a stable workforce, and to create healthier, more resilient communities. Our work with both employees /employers, and local communities, gives us unique insights that could be valuable to your committee and the rest of the legislature in the coming year. We are eager to partner with Vermont legislators on solutions and to offer data, resources, and local voices to help inform your work.

One such resource that I have brought for you today, and is of particular significance to your committee, is our Mental Health Toolkit. This was created in partnership between our Working Bridges program and our Mental Health Initiative. We have heard from employers how our Mental Health Toolkit is both comprehensive and functional for businesses and organizations. Recently, a client sourcing this toolkit had this to offer: "The scripted language and data presented throughout the Toolkit removes the guesswork of how to approach mental health wellness."

Shortly we will have our 2023 Network report to share which will provide insight into the most pressing issues for working Vermonters. These issues should be of no surprise such as access to affordable (or any) housing, food insecurity, access to childcare, health care, and more. Over the last few years, we have also seen an increase in the need for connection and identified many gaps in access to mental health care and substance misuse treatment, recovery, and prevention. To address this our staff has invested in advancing our tools, in addition to our certifications for Resource Coordinators. For example, in addition to traditional certifications like financial coaching, in recent years we have trained our resource coordinators to be recovery coaches to help address the significant increase in working Vermonter's struggling with substance misuse. We co-created, through Working Bridges and the many partners in the Chittenden County Opioid Alliance, a toolkit for employers supporting Vermonters in Recovery.

Coming out of the pandemic we saw a need to upskill our community to become protective factors for each other through Mental Health First Aid training. Not just for resource coordinators but for the community, through our efforts we have doubled the number of Mental Health First Aid trainers in the state, including one of our own staff, in order to bring this training to employers. What is Mental Health First Aid? Well, if I were to choke at this table today, how many people in here know the Heimlich maneuver? If I was to have a heart attack and stop breathing, who knows CPR? Are any of you paramedics or doctors? In every business I talk to there is always someone with first aid training, it's not an accident, and it is also not to replace the high-quality care our first responders and hospitals provide. Rather it is an intentional community intervention to buy time for the paramedics or other professionals to arrive or in the case of the Heimlich to potentially

avoid the need for advanced care all together. Mental Health First aid does that, we wish we could parachute in a couple thousand mental health professionals to staff our designated agencies, schools, hospitals – but not only do we not have the people, we know we don't have anywhere for them to live. That's where WE all come in, we all have a role to play in community health. That's why we are also offering to provide Mental Health First Aid training for the legislature – as a large employer you should be prepared to support your colleagues, neighbors, constituents, friends, and family.

We firmly believe in the power of our collective work and thank you for your efforts in supporting the health of our communities. Our team stands ready to offer connections, insights, data, conversations, and hope. Change happens when local people come together to focus on local solutions. But it is not just the change that happens at that marvelous intersection, it is hope and pride in what we all accomplish when we work together. As we dive deeper into this legislative session let's choose to focus on – and to grow – what's working in our communities. Let's encourage our hopes, rather than our fears. I look forward to working with you more in the months and years ahead.