

TO: House Appropriations Services Committee (Rep. Johnson, Chair; Rep. Fagan, Vice Chair; Rep. Keenan, Ranking Member; Rep. Helm; Rep. Feltus; Rep. Hooper; Rep. Lanpher; Rep. O'Brien; Rep. Pearce; Rep. Toll, and Rep. Trieber)

FROM: Susan Yuan, Vice President, Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights

RE: SFY2016 Budget items impacting Vermonters who have disabilities

DATE: February 25, 2015

Thank you for the opportunity to speak regarding the impact of proposed budget changes on Vermonters who have disabilities.

I am representing the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights, a cross-disability organization with 26 organizational members, formed more than 40 years ago to protect and advance the rights of citizens with disabilities. While each of our organizations is concerned about the parts of this budget that impact their constituents, VCDR is concerned about the collective impact of the budget cuts across Vermont's people who have disabilities, many of whom also have limited incomes. I will speak first about the cuts that impact across disabilities and families in poverty.

We are opposed to counting \$125 of SSI income for an adult in a family receiving Reach-Up against the family's Reach-Up grant, which amounts to a "disability tax" against some of our poorest families. 1,106 families will be affected; we urge you to continue to fund the Reach Up program while excluding SSI benefits.

The proposed elimination of \$6 million in state funds for the LIHEAP program will impact the amount a family must spend on heating to get through the winter. The current benefit only pays a small portion of the heating costs of an eligible family. People with disabilities are underemployed, and may be even more in need of this program. It's cold out there!

Under Vocational Rehabilitation grants, the budget proposes to eliminate \$70,000 funding the Assistive Technology Reuse Program, a frugal program that enables Vermonters with disabilities to save on costs by recycling still usable equipment.

One example of collected impacts and how some of the proposed cuts work together against policies that the state has been pursuing is the combined effect on recidivism of cuts to available housing vouchers in the Department of Mental Health,

elimination of funding for the Sparrow Project in Southeast Vermont and Central Vermont's Collaborative Solutions Integration Project, and the halving of support for the Community High School of Vermont. Last year good steps were made to enact a policy of sequential intercept through S.295 (Act 195) in preventing unnecessary incarceration, particularly of people with disabilities.

Similarly, the state has wisely invested in peer-oriented programs and services like the Vermont Psychiatric Survivors and the Workforce Wellness Coalition and yet proposes to cut one fourth of the former's budget. How will cuts like these affect the progress we have tried to make in taking pressure off inpatient psychiatric services?

And how economical is it to decrease current levels of support to our neighbors who are blind by \$42,000 while realizing only \$8,000 of savings to the general fund-- particularly as we have seen an increase in need for services over recent years with flat funding?

Vermont Legal Aid is being cut by 10%. Low-income Vermonters with disabilities rely on this program to provide needed advice.

Finally, we reiterate the issues you have heard concerning the budget for Developmental Services. The on-going need for new case-load funding is not a result of greed or inappropriate use—rather it reflects that more children with disabilities are born and survive each year than people who die. Only 21% of those Vermonters eligible for services meet a priority and receive supports. The rest remain waiting at home, with increasingly aging parents, until those parents become incapable of caring for them, or die. We urge you, as our legislators, to seek clarity about the impact of the \$1.9 million dollars “savings” proposed in the budget. Will they really have “no impact on people receiving services”?

Thank you.