Good evening. My name is Heather Wilson. I live and work in St. Albans and I am here to speak on behalf of the designated and specialized service agencies across the state of Vermont. We are seeking a 6.5% Medicaid rate increase for our organizations, $14.6 million from the general fund.

I want to send a thank you from Northwestern Counseling & Support Services. The legislature provided our system of care a Medicaid rate increase and one-time funds for tuition assistance and loan repayment. These investments were very appreciated and have helped us to reduce turnover from 34% to 22%.

It is important that we continue to invest in our organizations serving children, adults, individuals with developmental disabilities, and individuals with substance use disorders. We have to address the cost of our system (salaries, insurance, operating costs) in order to ensure services remain for all Vermonters.

A workforce that often feels fragile strives to respond to the high level of mental health needs. This may be a child dealing with thoughts of suicide and engaging in self-harming behavior; a child with complex psychiatric issues spending significant amount of time in the emergency department while they wait a year for residential treatment; or a child with autism spectrum disorder whose services are suddenly stopped due to lack of funding.

High acuity and workplace stressors on staff can be unrelenting. The administrative paperwork burden is huge, and we are consistently told that the available salaries are inadequate for their life, and do not recognize their educational investments and professional licenses. Last year we struggled to retain qualified staff feeling disillusioned by an underfunded and overburdened system. We can do better.

To support Vermont, we need to adequately fund our designated and specialized service agencies. A Medicaid rate increase of 6.5% is necessary to keep our services going, and our communities strong.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Submitted by,

Heather Wilson