



Legislative Policy Summary

2014 Legislative Session - January 16, 2014

The Vermont Mayors Coalition is advocating for state action to support municipalities in the following areas:

- Mental Health System Reform
- Statewide Property Tax Reform to Promote Education Cost Containment
- Addiction Prevention, Treatment, and Enforcement Initiatives
- Strengthening Vermont's Downtowns
- Waterway Protection from Stormwater Run-off

Mental Health System Reform

The Vermont Mayors Coalition recognizes that one of the most significant challenges our state faces today is the capacity to provide treatment opportunities and health care delivery systems for members of our communities who suffer from psychiatric illness. Our communities are home to many individuals who do not have access to the psychiatric treatment they need due to the limited availability of trained personnel and the overcrowding of our health care facilities. In some cases, these individuals can present a significant danger to the public and themselves. Additionally, unreasonable demands are being placed on our law enforcement agencies to serve as first responders to situations involving people with psychiatric illness, causing officers not specifically trained as mental health specialists to assume that role. While the police have become the de facto mental health workers, our emergency rooms and prisons collectively have become the de facto state hospital. The Coalition advocates for improvements to both the capacity and quality of treatment, supporting mental health reform in these areas:

- **Timely review:** The judicial review process relating to some psychiatric treatment decisions can take months. S.287 would provide patients access to a quicker judicial review process.
- **Community-based services:** Increase the effectiveness of these services.
- **Statewide inpatient capacity:** Ensure adequate statewide inpatient capacity that is crucial for individuals to receive the treatment they need in the appropriate environment. Such capacity also will alleviate the overcrowding of our emergency departments and help our police departments focus on law enforcement.

Bill Benton, **VERGENNES** • Liz Gamache, **ST. ALBANS** • John Hollar, **MONTPELIER** • Thom Lauzon, **BARRE**
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Statewide Property Tax Reform to Promote Education Cost Containment

Per pupil spending in Vermont has doubled over the past ten years, while the statewide student population has fallen by nearly 20 percent. As stewards of municipal budgets, the members of the Coalition are concerned about the growth of educational spending and the impact it will have on our cities. Moreover, we need to increase funding for pre-K education, investment made more difficult based on the rapid growth in K-12 spending. The Coalition supports the following initiatives to address the rise in education property taxes:

- Create an Administrative Education Cost Reduction Commission with comprehensive administrative consolidation powers and a mandate to find sufficient savings to fund new investment for children ages 0-5 years old.
- Lower the High Spending Threshold to provide a greater incentive for districts that spend above the statewide average to reduce their spending.
- Create a stronger link between increased local spending and tax rates.

Addiction Prevention, Treatment, and Enforcement Initiatives

The Coalition supports the Governor's call for an all-hands-on-deck effort to address the state's rising opiate addiction crisis. Vermont's cities have seen substantial increases in property crimes and, as noted by the Governor, the number of Vermonters seeking treatment for opiates has risen dramatically since 2000. The Coalition believes that prevention, treatment, and enforcement all are essential elements of this effort. Increasing treatment impacts the demand side, and increasing enforcement impacts the supply side. The Coalition endorses the Administration's four-point plan, including:

- Increasing treatment across the state through the allocation of more than \$1 million in additional resources and support to existing treatment centers – enabling them to alleviate long waiting lists, statewide recovery centers, and substance abuse and mental health treatment services for Reach Up recipients.
- Addressing drug addiction within the criminal justice system by promoting timely, evidence-based assessments to identify and help treat those in immediate need.
- Promoting stronger and more coordinated law enforcement efforts through a new mapping portal, the reorganization of the Governor's Criminal Justice Cabinet, full funding of state drug task forces, and strengthening of criminal penalties.
- Taking a comprehensive and creative approach to prevention and looking specifically to the positive role that education and medical providers can play in this effort.

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Strengthening Vermont's Downtowns

The Vermont way of life is directly tied to healthy downtowns for our municipalities and villages. The Coalition supports the following reforms to continue the progress enjoyed in Vermont's downtowns during the last two decades:

- Passage of the Shumlin Administration proposal to increase the \$1.7 million cap on the Vermont Downtown & Village Center Tax Credit Program by \$500,000, resulting in \$2.2 million in available tax credits for historic rehabilitation projects, code improvement projects, and façade improvement projects.
- Implementation of the Department of Housing & Community Development's recommendation (December 15, 2013) to modify the smart growth, mixed use residential jurisdictional thresholds for Downtowns, Growth Centers and Neighborhood Development Areas, resulting in a more streamlined approval process.

Waterway Protection from Stormwater Run-off

The Coalition recognizes that phosphorous run-off into Vermont's lakes and streams is a serious problem that must be addressed more vigorously than it is today. The Coalition supports total maximum daily load (TMDL) reform as long as it is:

- **Effective:** The new TMDL interventions result in meaningful improvements to water quality.
- **Fair:** All Vermonters benefit from healthy lakes and streams and, therefore, all Vermonters should contribute to the stormwater protection system.
- **Efficient:** The state's finite stormwater protection resources should be expended by consideration of a number of project goals, including: significant level of phosphorus reduction; high impact; ability to achieve rapid resolution; and low cost.

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