

TESTIMONY OF VSEA

By Steve Howard, Legislative Director
HOUSE HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

VSEA members care deeply about the Vermonters they serve. That is why they strongly support the passage of this bill. VSEA members do not believe the clients they work so hard to help should pay the price for the high error rates in 3 squares that have resulted from inadequate staffing for growing caseloads, the lack of useful training and the continued use of "process management" or "modernization" that many employees feel is failing.

ESD IS IN CRISIS- THERE IS NO DOUBT ABOUT IT.

VSEA members have been proactively trying to improve the situation in ESD thru a labor management committee. Over the last year, VSEA members on this committee have repeatedly asked and suggested to management solutions to the crisis in ESD and they have repeatedly sought information from management about significant policy and program changes that were pending, well in advance of what ultimately resulted in crisis after crisis, things like changes to General Assistance, Reach Up and a small initiative you might have heard about called Vermont Health Connect, these requests for information never came until unfortunately once again the division found itself in crisis trying to manage what a little planning, foresight and cooperation with the experts, the state employees on the front lines could have prevented.

Investing in your state workers rather than blaming them will pay dividends. These are complex and difficult jobs governed by federal regulations and state policy. These are policies and regulations that change frequently and according to our members on the frontlines, often daily. According to Data provided by USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), in Vermont the number of clients receiving 3 squares benefits has increased 39% from FY 2009 to FY2012.

ADEQUATE STAFF

VSEA members applaud the management in DCF for requesting from the administration 41 new positions for the FY 14 budget to adequately staff ESD to meet the increased demand. VSEA members are grateful for the 14 benefits programs specialist positions that were ultimately created in FY 14. That was a good down payment on a severely overworked and under staffed division. The decision to create these 14 positions was a decision of the Administration and the General Assembly- not the workers. We encourage you to revisit the staffing request and urge you to create the remaining 27 full time classified positions.

BETTER AND MORE TRAINING FOR STAFF

Importantly, and finally after repeatedly almost begging management for more consistent and useful training, finally, the training program at ESD will be staffed once again and put to work helping employees manage bloated caseloads with complex requirements. A Training Supervisor has finally been hired and is expected to fill the new training positions. The decision to eliminate the training program was a decision of management in the Douglas Administration not the workers.

CONDUCT A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION OF "PROCESS MANAGEMENT" OR "MODERNIZATION"

This system with centralized intake is not working and is leading an increase in error rates. Too many cooks in the kitchen spoil the broth. Too many hands touching the cases create errors. One of our members told us that, this is because employees from all over the state may touch all cases and each time they look at it, they have to "re-work" the case. In FY 2009, before the system was implemented, the error rate was 5.42%. After the system was implemented in September of 2009, the error rates rose to 6.59% in FY 2010 and continued to rise in FY 2011 to 8.53% The decision to move to this system was a decision made by management not by the workers.

LISTEN TO THE WORKERS

Almost desperate to turn the crisis in ESD around, members of the VSEA organized and moved a survey to its members on the frontline. This survey made 11 concrete suggestions to management to turn the tide and restore the division back to stability and success. That survey was completed in May 2013, Eight months later, the administration still hasn't responded to the critical feedback provided to them by the workers on the frontline who care so much about the people they serve and the work they do.

Don't punish the workers for the decisions of others, listen to them and working together we can prevent bills like this bill from being necessary in the future.