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Date: January 12, 2016
To: House Committee on Appropriations
From: Ed Paquin, Exec. Dir., DRVT
Regarding: FY'16 Budget Adjustment Bill

DRVT would like to focus on two areas of import to people with disabilities in the 2015 Budget Adjustment.

In Vermont the State has determined that the delivery of community services is best done through our network of designated community agencies. As you know, over the years we've relied less and less on State employees for direct services in areas like mental health and developmental services and home based long term care. Adequate access can only be assured if reimbursement for those services is at a realistic level. And our designated agencies realistically do not have the private insurance market onto which they can cost-shift unmet overhead. As important as it is that the State assures that tax dollars are spent wisely, it has become counterproductive to continue to put pressure on agencies who already have turnover rates so high that consistent service is an issue.

Actions in FY'16 have made Group Therapy and Applied Behavior Analysis very difficult services to deliver. And this is a time when the need for the former is clear if we accept that there is an issue with substance abuse in the state and when the latter offers some hope to families of children with Autism. These rate reductions just add to the difficulties that DRVT has seen with turnover of case-management in agencies that make up the backbone of our community based system and which have been financially stressed for years.

Defending and Advancing the rights of people with disabilities & mental health issues, and of the Deaf.

I would also hope that Budget Adjustment could offer an opportunity to reverse a policy that will drive some of our state's poorest and least able-to-work citizens farther into poverty. ReachUp has seen a decline in enrolment that is projected to save over four million dollars in FY'16 and yet we seem comfortable reducing the benefits of households that generally consist of a parent who is judged to be too disabled to work and dependent children for whom the state provides about one half of what those children need for sustenance. In these families the state already assumes that support of the disabled parent is through SSI and bases the ReachUp grant only on the number of non-disabled dependents. Compare this disability tax, which amounts to around fifteen hundred dollars a year to the impact you would see on an average earning family should they experience a similar rise in another tax, or a decrease in support from any other source through state action.

We appreciate the difficulty of balancing a budget, but we hope that you remember that your actions can truly help people with disabilities to live decent lives or can exacerbate problems and drive them further into poverty.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.