

Testimony of Peter Jacobsen
Executive Director, Vermont CARES
February 11, 2016

My name is Peter Jacobsen. I am the Executive Director of Vermont CARES, Vermont's largest and longest-serving AIDS Service Organization, which is part of a network of HIV prevention, care, and medication providers. I am here to support the Governor's proposed budget strengthening HIV care and prevention, including increased funding for syringe exchange. It's a pleasure to present this information to you the week of AIDS Awareness Day – advocates were grateful to speak with some of you and your colleagues in the card room earlier this week.

This memo outlines our support of the Governor's proposal, with a few small clarifications.

Funding for AIDS Services

The Health Department has proposed shifting to an RFP process for the \$475,000 in AIDS medication rebates. This is new for these organizations: in years past language defined prescribed amounts to specific AIDS organizations across Vermont. We understand this change to be necessary per HRSA guidelines. In consultation with AIDS organizations, we suspect this RFP will preserve necessary HIV medical care, potentially more efficiently.

Syringe Exchange Programs

In addition to the \$100,000 we receive annually for prevention (which is currently used only for syringe exchange), we also support the proposed additional \$150,000 specifically for this work.

As I've described recently in budget adjustment discussions, Vermont's syringe exchanges are dangerously underfunded. These programs support people struggling with addictions who are waiting for treatment, and are still trying to stay healthy. Current programs in Burlington, Rutland, Middlebury, St. Johnsbury, White River Junction, and the dozen or so communities we serve through mobile exchanges serve thousands of our neighbors who can't access treatment. The Governor's proposed additional funding will stabilize existing programs or expand them to towns recently identified by CDC as being at risk of an HIV or HepC outbreak because of shared or dirty syringes.

Amendments Background

Section E.312 (a)(4) - We added the words "syringe exchange programs". The language that has appeared in the budget each year does include work with intravenous drug users, but because the Department of Health and collaborative organizations have chosen to use all of these funds for syringe exchange programs, we thought those programs should be specifically mentioned.

Section E.312 (a)(5) – We added this section in response to the Governor's proposal to add \$150,000 to syringe exchange programs. No budget language currently exists for this new funding and we believe that this section is the appropriate place for this language. The language appropriates \$150,000 specifically for syringe exchange programs. This mirrors the administration's intent, and more clearly outlines how this funding should be allocated.

This HIV care, prevention, and syringe exchange funding is vital as our state takes steps toward being the first in the nation with no new HIV infections by the year 2020. We call this Vermont's

“On the Road to Zero” campaign, and we could not even envision this achievable goal without the legislature’s strong ongoing support of our shared statewide mission.

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss this budget language with you. My contact information is listed on the memo should any of you have any follow up questions.

Proposed Amendments

Sec. E.312 Health – public health

(a) AIDS/HIV funding:

(4) In fiscal year 2017, the Department of Health shall provide grants in the amount of \$100,000 in general funds to Vermont AIDS service organizations and other Vermont HIV/AIDS prevention providers for community-based HIV prevention programs and services. These funds shall be used for HIV/AIDS prevention purposes, including syringe exchange programs, improving the availability of confidential and anonymous HIV testing; prevention work with at-risk groups such as women, intravenous drug users, and people of color; and anti-stigma campaigns. No more than 15 percent of the funds may be used for the administration of such services by the recipients of these funds. The method by which these prevention funds are distributed shall be determined by mutual agreement of the Department of Health and the Vermont AIDS service organizations and other Vermont HIV/AIDS prevention providers.

(5) In fiscal year 2017, the Department of Health shall provide grants in the amount of \$150,000 in general funds to Vermont AIDS service organizations and other Vermont HIV/AIDS prevention providers for syringe exchange programs. These funds shall be added proportionately to the current grants for the three existing syringe exchange providers receiving grants under subsection (4) above. The funding shall be used to cover provider costs incurred in excess of the current level of funding and to expand their services. The performance period for these grants will be from April 2015 through June 2016.

For questions, please contact:

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