February 25, 2015

House Appropriations (VT)

My name is Cindy Martindill. I am the interim associate dean of nursing at Vermont Tech and I am here today to speak on the behalf of our educational partner Vermont Interactive Technologies.

The mission of the Vermont Tech nursing program is to provide accessible nursing education to Vermonters. This fall Vermont Tech will enroll a total of 333 nursing students in our LPN and ADN programs Of these 333 students, 117 (35%) are expecting to attend a distance education site in their home communities of Lyndonville, Middlebury, Newport, Saint Albans, Springfield or White River Junction. The Vermont Tech nursing program can be provided at each of these 6 sites only because we use Vermont Interactive Technologies as the educational modality to offer our distance nursing program.

Becoming a nurse requires gaining knowledge, learning technical skills, learning and practicing problem solving skills, learning how to work in groups, and perhaps the hallmark of nursing…developing a true sense and practice of caring about others. We have used VIT as our delivery model because it allows us to provide opportunities for students to learn and practice each of these aspects of nursing. Vermont Tech nursing has developed a very effective use of distance education through the use of VIT. Our use of VIT for distance education was recently cited as "best practice" by ACEN, the national nursing accrediting body.

The use of VIT as a nursing program delivery model works. It not only works, it works well. The success of our distance nursing program is measured by positive program outcomes. The distance PN graduates last year had a 100% pass rate on the licensing exam, tops in the nation and our distance RN students had an 89% pass rate on the RN licensing exam, tops in Vermont. Our graduates tell us that 90% of them felt ready to take their licensing exam and felt clinically competent to begin a career as a nurse. The employers of our distance site graduates agreed 100% that the graduates were prepared. We have a very successful distance education program, which is delivered through the use of VIT.

Therefore, as the interim associate dean of the Vermont Tech nursing program, I have two major concerns related to the sudden decision to discontinue Vermont Interactive Technologies without providing adequate planning time for VIT users to research and trial alternatives to determine the effect of those alternatives on program outcomes and student learning.

My fist concern is for the current and potential students in our distance nursing program. We know that the use of Vermont Interactive Technologies works well in delivering our nursing program to our 117 distance site students. Not only are our graduates are successful in passing their licensure exam and entering the health care workforce as valued employees but they are highly satisfied with their educational experience using VIT. On this year's program evaluation, 92% of our students agreed that VIT provided an adequate learning environment and 94% agreed that VIT met their learning needs. A change in the delivery modality of our program to distance students has the very real potential of jeopardizing our very positive program outcomes. These positive outcomes are essential for the continued national accreditation of our PN and ADN nursing programs and for the continued Vermont Board of Nursing approval of our programs. Without Vermont Board of Nursing approval, we could not continue to provide distance learning to our 6 rural communities.

My second concern is for the future of the nursing workforce in the communities of Lyndonville, Middlebury, Newport, Saint Albans, Springfield and White River Junction. The Vermont Tech nursing students in those communities receive their education in their home community and after graduation are hired by the local health care agencies. In many of those communities, it is difficult to recruit nursing staff; thus the agencies have come to rely on the pipeline of local nursing graduates that is supplied by the Vermont Tech nursing program through the use of Vermont Interactive Technologies. There is the potential that without the program delivery modality of VIT and thus the loss of a local nursing education program, these 6 communities will lose a significant nursing workforce (117 potential nurses each year), thus potentially jeopardizing the health of rural Vermonters.

Vermont Interactive Technologies has been an integral part of the delivery of the Vermont Tech nursing program to rural distance locations for many years. It provides an educational opportunity for 1/3 of our PN and ADN nursing students. We have a history of very positive program outcomes and we have been able to supply the rural communities with a well prepared, sought after nursing workforce. There is an absolute need for Vermont Interactive Technologies as they support the delivery of distance nursing education and thus aid in meeting the health care needs of all Vermonters. Thank you.