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## House Appropriations

I'm Nicole LeBlanc from Montpelier and I am the Advocacy Director for Green Mountain Self-Advocates (GMSA), a disability rights organization. I'm on the Autism Spectrum and I get Developmental Disabilities Services. I manage these services which enable me to work 30 hours a week and live on my own.

I was appointed by Commissioner Wehry to be a member of state Equity Committee for Developmental Service. We meet once a month to review proposals from people in need of new services and give advice to DAIL.

We at GMSA are glad to see that the Governor's Budget for Developmental Services includes 6.5 million in new caseload. Less than 21% of people eligible for developmental services get any. The new money is needed for people who are in crisis and in need of services. Below I give a few examples of the needs people have who are applying for services.

We are pleased to see the Governor's budget includes a Medicaid rate increase. This will give support staff a cost of living increase. This is needed because they don't make a livable wage and because retention among direct support providers is a huge challenge. When people lose good people it can affect their sense of stability.

However, there is also a 1.9 million dollar "Policy Cut" for existing services. Developmental Services for people already in the system have been cut 6 times since 2009 for more than 14 million dollars. The habit of taking

services away from someone who has them to give them to someone else who is in crisis weakens our system and cannot continue.

In the DCF budget there is a “Disability Tax” for families receiving Reach Up, which seems unfair. Families who support a loved one with a disability should not be penalized. The benefits received from SSI are barely enough to cover the expenses of supporting a family member with a disability. The family still needs to get all their benefits from Reach Up.

As we all know VT is facing tough fiscal challenges, but we need a balanced approach to solve the problem. Everybody needs to pitch in. It is unfair to always ask those who get services to take a cut. In my role on the state equity committee I review 30 proposals or more proposals each month from people with developmental disabilities that need new services. Here are some examples of our struggles.

Ex. 1 - Person A is a young married person, with an Intellectual Disability who is a parent. Their section 8 voucher was terminated due to conflict with a landlord and other family issues that resulted in police being called. Without services this family would not be able to maintain their housing.

Ex. 2 – Person B is young person who has intense health issues. They have been hospitalized at the Brattleboro Retreat. The person also has substance abuse issues and challenging behavior. The safety of the family and workers is at risk.

Ex. 3 – Person C is a young person who needs 2:1 support at all times. The person’s family has had to lock themselves in their bathroom due to major safety concerns. Destruction of property at the house has occurred as a result of behavioral outbursts, resulting in significant repair costs. They also have sleep issues.

Ex. 4 – Person D has significant mental health issues and other health problems in addition to having a developmental disability. The person’s mental health has declined. The person has made suicidal threats, displays self-harming behavior which results in being hospitalized.

Ex. 5 - Person E is middle aged, deaf and needs significant support around communication. The person has become violent towards their mother on several occasions. The person has few life skills. Police have been called because the person was hitting their mother in the face. The mother is requesting help because she can't deal with the intense behaviors and other issues.

These are some of the many challenges that families are facing on a regular basis. Sometimes I wish the members of this committee could just once attend an Equity Committee meeting to hear firsthand the life stories of people with developmental disabilities who are in crisis. They need services. Most are living with their families, some are trying to make it alone but they need help to deal with a major life crisis. In closing, we would ask that you please look at raising taxes to help protect the social safety net that people with disabilities and their families rely on.

Thank you for listening.

Nicole