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**TO: Senate and House Committees on Appropriations
Senate and House Committees on Government Operations**

FROM: Maribeth Spellman, Commissioner

DATE: January 15, 2015

SUBJECT: High Stress State Employee Positions Report

This report will address positions indicated in Act 152, as well as potential changes in structure of State employment.

We have consulted with the Vermont State Treasurer, the Vermont State Employees' Association, and the heads of the Department of Children and Families, the Department of Public Safety, the Department of Mental Health, and the Department of Corrections, as well as Risk Management at the Agency of Administration, and Invest EAP, the employee assistance program for state employees.

Data

Risk Management Division of the Agency of Administration has provided to the Department of Human Resources the number of claims filed for workers compensation for "mental stress" since 2009, an approximate 5 year period. They note that there is no specific category for PTSD. Nearly all of the mental stress claims were denied as not eligible for coverage under Vermont law, per Risk Management. Since 2009, "mental stress" claims for the named groups in Act 152 were as follows:

- Department of Children and Families- 1 claim, denied
- Department of Corrections- 1 claim accepted, 3 denied
- Department of Public Safety- 2 claims accepted, 5 denied
- Vermont Psychiatric Hospital- 1 claim under current consideration
- Vermont Veterans' Home- 2 claims denied
- Woodside- 1 claim denied, 1 claim under current consideration

Referring to State Treasurer Beth Pearce's memo to Senator Jane Kitchel, Chair, Senate Appropriations Committee, dated March 11, 2014, the Treasurer referred to the study in the Journal of Traumatic Stress (April, 2012) citing duty related trauma exposure in 911 telecommunications.

The Vermont State Employees Association (VSEA) has presented the Department of Human Resources their survey of state employees in the groups indicated in Act 152. The Department of Human Resources is not the custodian of this information and cannot verify the methodology or results of the

survey, as the Department of Human Resources was not involved with its development or administration. Those responding to the survey distributed by VSEA indicate varying levels of work-related stress, with “burdensome workloads” and “management pressures” as the highest contributors to that stress. This survey did not include those groups who were not mentioned in Act 152, so there is no comparison to their stress levels, or contributors to that stress.

Steve Dickens, the Director of InvestEAP is a Licensed Psychologist- Master Level. We have consulted him on research regarding work related stress. The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) offered through InvestEAP, is provided for the benefit of State employees and members of their immediate household. This program assists employees and family members in addressing problems that impact their lives including stress, family, financial, substance abuse, and other issues. Active State employees and their families are eligible for this program. Multiple counselling sessions are provided, as needed.

Mr. Dickens has taken a look by Department, at the results of post-visit client surveys from 2009 through 2014, with regard to workplace issues and stress. Job title is not collected.¹ Across the departments, including those departments which are not named in Act 152, individuals seeking one-to-one clinical assistance, and responding to the InvestEAP survey, rated their stress as moderate or high fairly consistently in the range of 80%, somewhat higher for the Vermont hospitals (Veterans’ Home and Vermont State Hospital), lower for uniform State Police. A distinction was not made between workplace and non-workplace stress. It should be noted, however, that according to Mr. Dickens, each can affect the other. Just as workplace stress can put pressure on the home, stress at home can put pressure on the workplace. Post-visit customer surveys indicate that stress levels in general are decreased after EAP visits.

Mr. Dickens has additionally reported the following, (supported by multiple professional studies and references):

“The research supports our experience: while stress is multidimensional, the key to approaching stress in the workplace is training front line supervisors and managers. These individuals are the largest determining factor -- outside of the things we can't always control, such as staffing and work volume -- that influence employee stress. Few managers and even fewer supervisors are trained in organization-based (vs. individual-based, such as relaxation techniques) stress reduction. The research shows that these front-line managers must not only be trained in organization-based stress reduction skills, but such skills must be made integral to their responsibilities (sic) and job performance expectations. A component of such training involves educating this staff on how and when to ask for help from organizational development consultants. These approaches, unlike early retirement, would be most effective (cost-wise and result-wise) in addressing the root of the problem, or again, those components of the root causes that we can control.”

Early Retirement

In general, for the majority of state employees, electing an early retirement option affects the calculation of their pension. If an employee were to retire with the early retirement penalty in effect, their pension, based on their average final compensation and years of service, would be reduced a set percent each

¹ This data does not represent everyone who received EAP services. It pertains only to individuals who sought one-to-one clinical assistance, and not everyone who sought one-to-one assistance provided this information. The data was not obtained from a random sample of employees, so caution should be taken in its interpretation.

year, (currently 6%) for each year the individual is under the age of 62. Eliminating this penalty would eliminate the 6% per year reduction of the pension.

Per the above cited Treasurer memo, Facility employees of the Department of Corrections, as Department of Corrections employees, who have provided direct security and treatment services to offenders under supervision in the community; Woodside facility employees who have provided direct patient care for 20 years, and Vermont State Hospital employees who have provided direct patient care for 20 years, under certain criteria (20 years of service, age 55) have early retirement with no penalty as an option.

State Police Officers have an early retirement option at age 50 with 20 years of service, with no penalty.

Social workers at the Department of Children and Families, direct care providers at the Vermont Veterans' Home, and dispatchers at the Department of Public Safety do not have an early retirement option without penalty.

Consultation with all Departments named in Act 152 did not result in recommendations for expanded early retirement coverage with no penalty to additional classes of employees.

Based on the figures provided in the Treasurer's memo for the additional cost to allow a non-penalty early retirement option for dispatchers, a rough approximation of the additional cost to add DCF social workers in family services (approximately 220 including supervisors) and direct care providers of the Vermont Veteran's Home (approximately 110) was calculated. Without having the benefit of an actuarial evaluation, but simply amortizing the estimated impact to the retirement system costs for FY16, if we were to assume similar salaries, length of service, and the like as the dispatchers, these groups' additional costs to the retirement system in FY16 could be as high as \$938,500, in addition to the \$207,600 for dispatchers.

Recommendations

The Department of Human Resources is gearing up to provide enhanced supervisor and manager training across-the-board, focusing on critical areas including work-related stress. A larger facility and upgraded staffing will be available for this statewide effort beginning this spring. The initial training program is a core supervisory training program to be followed by a supervisory development program course of instruction for more advanced skills development.

Under the State's contract for EAP services with InvestEAP, departments can avail themselves of workplace stress-related training directed to specific groups, such as those indicated in Act 152. We will recommend prioritizing supervisor and manager workshops and consultations addressing workplace/organizational stress issues for those groups indicated in Act 152. Also, as is currently the case, state employees can request EAP counseling for work-related stress (in addition to other issues) by calling the confidential InvestEAP phone number

Per Mr. Dickens' statement on the available research, we believe the enhanced supervisor and manager training, along with facilitated access to EAP workshops focused on supervisory training is a more effective way of addressing and reducing workplace stress and better values the talents, experience and contributions of state employees.