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TO: Senate Appropriations Committee
FROM: Ed Paquin, President, Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights
RE: SFY 2016 Budget items impacting Vermonters with disabilities
DATE: April 7, 2015

I appreciate the opportunity to speak about the potential impact of proposed budget changes on Vermonters with disabilities. I am representing the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights, a cross-disability organization with over 20 organizational members, formed more than 40 years ago to protect and advance the rights of citizens with disabilities. Each of our organizations have concerns about the parts of the budget that impact their particular constituents, and VCDR is concerned about the collective impact of cuts on Vermonters with disabilities, many of whom have very limited incomes.

People with disabilities are disproportionately low-income and so will feel the impact of cuts that effect any families in poverty. We are opposed to counting \$125 of SSI income for an adult in a family receiving Reach-Up against the family's Reach-Up grant. This amounts to a "disability tax" against some of our poorest families. 1,106 families will be affected; we urge you to continue to fund the Reach Up program while excluding SSI benefits.

The proposed elimination of \$6 million in state funds for the LIHEAP program will impact the amount a family must spend on heating to get through the winter. The current benefit only pays only a portion of the heating costs of an eligible family. People with disabilities are often underemployed, and hence may be even more in need of this program. It has been a cold winter and will be again and there is no guarantee that petroleum prices will stay as low as they have been!

Under Vocational Rehabilitation grants, the Administration budget proposes to eliminate \$70,000 funding the Assistive Technology Reuse Program, a frugal program that enables Vermonters with disabilities to save on costs by recycling still usable equipment. We believe that there is potential in this for Medicaid savings that have not been fully realized.

One example of collected impacts, how some of the proposed cuts work together against policies that the state has been pursuing, is the combined effect on recidivism of cuts to available housing vouchers in the Department of Mental Health, elimination of funding for the Sparrow Project in Southeast Vermont, and Central Vermont's Collaborative Solutions Integration Project, and the halving of support for the Community High School of Vermont. Last year good steps were made to enact a policy of sequential intercept through S.295 (Act 195) in preventing unnecessary incarceration, particularly of people with disabilities, but this should not displace other successes in reintegration of inmates with disabilities.

Similarly, the state has wisely invested in peer-oriented programs and services like the Vermont Psychiatric Survivors and the Workforce Wellness Coalition and yet proposes to cut one fourth of the former's budget. How will cuts like these affect the progress we have tried to make in taking pressure off inpatient psychiatric services? And how economical is it to decrease current levels of support to our neighbors who are blind - and old - by \$42,000 while realizing only \$8,000 of savings to the general fund...particularly as we have seen an increase in need for services over recent years with flat funding?

Vermont Legal Aid is proposed to be cut by 10%. Low-income Vermonters with disabilities have little other recourse to legal services. They rely on this program to provide needed advice and defense in mental health proceedings and there is irony that just as the state has passed a law (S.287) with the hope of speeding up judicial processes, we contemplate cuts to the protection of civil rights.

Finally, we reiterate the issues you have heard concerning the budget for Developmental Services. The on-going need for new case-load funding is not a result of greed or inappropriate use - rather it reflects that more children with disabilities are born and survive each year than people who die. Currently, only about 21% of those Vermonters eligible for services meet a funding "priority" and receive supports. The rest remain waiting at home, with increasingly aging parents, until those parents become incapable of caring for them, or die. We urge you, as our legislators, to seek clarity about the impact of the \$1.9 million dollars "savings" proposed in the budget. Will they really have "no impact on people receiving services"?

We can offer you no easy solutions, but unfortunately we fear that lowering the standard of living for Vermont's most vulnerable seems to be seen as easier than recognizing our responsibility to insure equal opportunity for all of our citizens, regardless of disability.

Thank you for your attention and hard work.

The mission of VCDR is to advance the human and civil rights of people with disabilities to ensure full and equal participation in all aspects of community life and the political process.