

Testimony of Sarah Billings-Berg, advocate for Vermont Interactive Technologies, to the Senate Committee on Appropriations, April 7, 2015.

Good Afternoon Members of the Committee,

My name is Sarah Billings-Berg and I am an Assistant Professor and the Interim Site Director for the Vermont Technical College Nursing Program in the Northeast Kingdom Region. Please note that I am testifying today as an individual nursing educator, concerned about the delivery of distance nursing education. My presence was not solicited by Vermont Interactive Technologies (VIT) or Vermont Technical College. I am here because I am extremely concerned about the future of VIT, which directly affects nursing education throughout the state and Vermont's nursing workforce.

Vermont Tech nursing has 7 sites throughout the state that utilize Vermont Interactive Technologies as the delivery system, including Middlebury, St. Albans, Randolph, Springfield, White River Jct, Lyndon, and Newport. I have taught Practical Nursing and Associate Degree Nursing for the past 6 years in the Northeast Kingdom Region, which includes White River, Lyndon, and Newport sites. Our region is dependent on VIT as a delivery method. As you know, the Northeast Kingdom Region of Vermont is somewhat isolated from other portions of the state due to its rural nature and significant distance from other areas. Because of this geography, individuals in the NEK who wish to go to nursing school have few options. They can either relocate, drive 1-3 hours one way to attend class at a traditional campus like Norwich University or UVM, or attend a nursing program in New Hampshire. As you can imagine, having Vermont Tech present in the NEK and other rural or isolated areas in Vermont, gives students a realistic option that allows them to remain in their community, work in their community throughout their nursing education, and eventually become nurses who remain in and serve their community. Our students are largely non-traditional with an average age of 35. They have families and jobs in addition to attending nursing school. Many are single parents. VIT classrooms make attending this program possible for those students. VIT allows nursing professors and students the opportunity to connect over a distance in real time while utilizing teaching techniques that are evidence-based and address multiple learning styles. I am fearful that utilizing alternative modalities like Skype or Adobe Connect would not offer the same opportunities for teaching and reinforcing such concepts as caring, team dynamics, group problem solving, verbal communication, and role playing, which are all paramount in a quality nursing education, especially in a pre-licensure program such as Vermont Tech's.

Vermont Tech nursing recently underwent an accreditation visit by the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing, who noted on record that utilizing VIT for our distance sites is demonstration of best practice, and commented that VIT use significantly contributes to the Vermont Tech Nursing Department's success which is demonstrated by our low attrition

rates, which are less than 10%, and high licensing exam pass rates, which are well above the national average.

At this time, Vermont Tech has a minimum of 117 students who have been accepted to either begin the nursing program or continue in the nursing program at distance VIT sites in the Fall 2015. Should VIT lose its funding, these students will potentially lose their accessibility to a nursing degree, which translates into a loss of nurses in the state of Vermont. Even a delay of program delivery to these areas to allow for a VIT alternative to be implemented could result in a loss of students for Vermont Tech, but more importantly, a loss of potential nurses for the State of Vermont.

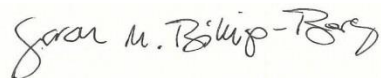
I would also like to add that the Institute of Medicine has set forth a recommendation for all acute care patient facilities that by the year 2020, 80% of the nursing staff be bachelors prepared. This will be a very challenging goal to meet for small rural hospitals like many of those found in Vermont. The practical nursing program and associate degree in nursing program that are delivered via VIT at Vermont Tech are stepping stones to the Bachelor's degree in nursing program. If the option for practical nurse and associate degree programs are not there for a significant portion of potential nurses, Vermont's healthcare facilities will have an even bigger challenge meeting the Institute of Medicine's recommended goal.

While Vermont Tech is working on developing a system to replace VIT, should one be needed, having this system up and running by Fall 2015 is a lofty goal. Implementing a change of this magnitude should ideally occur over 10-12 months, considering technology replacement, testing, and orienting faculty & students. To expect this change to occur by the fall 2015 and be as effective as VIT is unrealistic.

Senators, I am hoping that you understand that losing VIT as a resource will not only affect the many customers that utilize the service, but it will also have an impact on Vermont's nursing workforce, the ability of our healthcare agencies to properly staff nurses, the ability of Vermont's citizens to pursue a nursing education, and may very well affect the quality of healthcare delivered in our small communities and across the state.

Thank you for your time.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sarah M. Billings-Berg". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

Sarah M. Billings-Berg, DC, MSN, RN, CNE