

Date: April 5, 2016
To: Senate Committee on Appropriations
From: Ed Paquin, VCDR President
Regarding: FY'17 Proposed Budget

Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to weigh in on the administration's proposed 2017 state budget. My name is Ed Paquin and I am the president of the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights. We represent over 20 organizations whose missions focus on the rights and needs of Vermonters with disabilities.

We appreciate that the Administration budget includes a substantial allotment for new caseload in Developmental Services and that the Mental Health budget has made up for some federal grants that have ended for housing and peer oriented services, and has added to suicide prevention. We need to point out, though, that our mental health and developmental services systems are under the inevitable pressure of inflation and labor costs. This compares unfavorably to services that have an annual rate-setting process (nursing homes, enhanced res care, etc.). Reductions to remuneration for group therapy and inadequate allotment for Applied Behavioral Analysts has only made this worse. Direct services in mental health, developmental services, and home-based long term care can only be assured if reimbursement for those services is at a realistic level. Since our designated agencies do not have the private insurance market onto which they can cost-shift unmet overhead, VCDR would urge you to support an increase to the DAs and SSAs greater than or at least equal to the 2% that was appropriated in the House.

VCDR would also ask that you support the House restoration of cuts made to Vermont Legal Aid whose work with very low-income Vermonters is extremely important for our community since a disproportionately large number of people with disabilities live in poverty. We also hope that you support the House

restoration of funding to the Office of the Vermont Health Care Advocate – their assistance for people trying to navigate the increasingly complex health care landscape is crucial.

VCDR would also request that you turn aside the severe cut made last year to families with dependent children and an adult whose ability to work is so compromised that she qualifies for the subsistence grant of Supplemental Security Income. Declines in Reach Up enrolment are projected to save over four million dollars in FY'16, so it seems unconscionable to essentially “tax” a family \$1,500 annually which is already in poverty and whose Reach Up grant is already figured at less than half the level of the need of the NON-disabled family members.

Compare this disability tax of one hundred twenty-five dollars a month to the impact you would see on an average-earning family should they experience a similar rise in another tax, or a decrease in support from any other source through state action. As challenging as it seems to balance a state budget, it can't be so hard that we feel the need to drive vulnerable families deeper into poverty. Some have said that average Vermonters face an “affordability crisis” and yet we assume that people living below the federal poverty level are flush enough to be able to afford a loss of \$125 per month.

Finally, I'd like to point out that in its major overhaul of the involuntary treatment statutes, this body declared in 1997 that “It is the policy of the General Assembly to work toward a mental health system that does not require coercion or the use of involuntary medication.” - 18 VSA § 7629(c). VCDR was very pleased that the House removed the administration's sweeping policy change that would have hamstrung any realistic defense on the part of an individual facing the prospect of commitment and of being drugged against his or her will. We believe that the House recognized that the projected savings were unlikely to be achieved and that policy changes of this import should be considered thoughtfully through the committees of jurisdiction.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our thoughts on these issues that profoundly affect people with disabilities.