

Dear Senate Education Committee,

3/30/16

Thank you for listening to me speak on behalf of my daughter, Martha, who has autism. Martha is an expensive student and she's about to cost the state of VT a few more hundred thousand dollars each year. However, one time funding can avoid this financial burden on the taxpayers of VT. The problem is, current policies are written to send kids out of state, not to keep them home.

I'm here to help my daughter and ultimately fix a broken system. In order for Martha to remain home, she needs a plan funded that takes 'out of the box' thinking. We have an inter-agency plan and we need both AOE and DAIL to communicate to support Martha and her plan to stay home. We are in the midst of crisis meetings now and I am concerned about VT's ability to fund Martha's home placement, and be forced to send her out of state to get her needs met. There is a system to fund children going out of state but there is not that same system to keep them home. I am hoping to change that today.

Martha has been in crisis for years and much more so recently. She is on the wait list at Melmark New England, in Andover, MA. This school was recommended by her team as it not only meets her severe and challenging profile needs but she can graduate into an ADULT GROUP HOME and stay through her adulthood, as VT HAS NOTHING FOR HER TO COME BACK TO.

Please know that this is NOT what I want for her. But because VT LACKS A SYSTEM TO FUND a very simple accommodation, one time, so that Martha can remain in her home, her school, and her community, she would be forced to leave VT to get the care that she needs. I don't think this is what VT wants. I think we want to keep our children home. And I think we want to keep our children safe. I also think we want to keep our children engaged and a part of our communities. And I know that we want to save VT dollars and VT jobs and enrich our own economy. I also hope we want to fix the problem of our most vulnerable Vermonters having to leave our state to get the education that they need. We need to create that infrastructure here, for the future of our vulnerable population. After reading about the VT boys at the Eagleton School, in MA, I hope you all understand that if our school districts were allowed the opportunity to create the solid infrastructures needed here, our state would send students away much more infrequently. In turn, VT would be much better off economically. Out of state schools are fiscally irresponsible, to say the least. Vermont has the resources, let's work with them. And I also know that sometimes out of state programs are needed, and I respect that, too.

I hope my daughter doesn't have to live many years away from home. I can't imagine that pain. But state policies have put me in this position. It's cruel, unnecessary and exhausting an already broken family. I'm sure none of you would want to be in my

shoes. I don't think you all realize what this broken system is doing to VT families. We are distraught, frightened and in my case, so frustrated as all of Martha's needs can be met right where we are. Disabilities should not cause us to separate; they should in fact be bringing us together.

Martha is a hard worker. SHE HAS NEVER FAILED out of a program or school placement but most have FAILED her. I have binders of files from the past 16 years to show that. She is certainly NOT failing out of our home, but SHE IS IN NEED OF A HOME ACCOMMODATED TO MEET HER NEEDS. She is in need of a home that meets her safety, and therapeutic needs as well as a place where she can be taught basic living skills, and what most take for granted, her activities of daily life. She needs this with 2:1 SKILLED support, and on a hard day, sometimes 3:1. SHE DOES NOT NEED TO LIVE OUT OF STATE TO HAVE HER NEEDS MET. That is why I am here today. But more so, I am here today to help fix the system so that 'individuals with moderate to severe developmental disabilities will know what VT's slogan of 'community inclusion' really is. They will never know that until families receive the resources necessary to make that happen. I hope you want that too, and I hope it's not just a slogan.

I was 10 years old when my oldest brother survived a traumatic brain injury. My mother started VT's 1<sup>st</sup> residential care home, Lenny Burke's Farm, because, otherwise he may have spent his young life living in a nursing home. Lenny Burke's Farm, Inc. is still growing strong today and has 7 properties, in both Rutland and Wallingford, serving vulnerable Vermonters in a more cost effective way. It's my family that has supported me, as a single parent so that I could best support my 2 children. That's what families do. I learned from our model of care and I started 3 businesses of my own, all to help my daughter, as she ages into adulthood. These businesses will offer that same support to the other Martha's in our community. That is what Vermonters do. We care about our families, our neighbors and our communities. What more is there to life than that unbreakable bond?

Please amend Bill H.859. I'd like to add wording that solves my daughter's funding issue. I'd like to keep my daughter home. And in the future, I feel this amendment will save VT dollars and save VT families.

Respectfully,

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