

**Testimony before Vermont Child Poverty Council  
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My name is Rich Smith and I am Director of the Backpack Program at Laraway Youth & Family Services. Established in 1972, Laraway is a non-profit organization dedicated to identifying and building on the strengths of children and youth experiencing emotional, behavioral and mental health challenges. We accomplish this by providing mental health counseling, a day treatment school, therapeutic foster care, and public school based behavioral intervention supports. We serve children and families from across Vermont. Over eighty percent of our clients come from Vermont households experiencing poverty.

**Description of Laraway's Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services for Low-Income Youth:**

**1. Mental Health and Substance Abuse services**

**Current Services:**

- School-based Clinicians in 3 Supervisory Unions (Currently blend ABA and Case Management)
- School-based and on-site therapy directed by Program Clinician and Laraway's Clinical Services Department
- Substance Abuse brief assessment upon intake, referral to community services
- Coordination between Behavioral and Clinical services within the program to support treatment goals and provide clients, families and schools with comprehensive services in schools, the community and on-site
- Clinical Case Management to provide case management and therapeutic interventions to clients in Backpack Program.
- For youth with Substance Abuse issues we currently access Behavioral Health & Wellness support or Center Point. Youth demonstrate success via involvement in the Get Your Stuff Together (GYST) group at Lamoille Valley Recovery Center.

**In Development:**

- Expand upon School-based clinical services model to blend traditional clinical approaches with LADC services at Laraway (On-site and potentially in schools)
- In partnership with the Agency Clinical Services Department - Expansion of Clinical Program within Backpack and agency-wide to provide services to Families during times of the day that they can access them (family therapy, parent training, support groups, etc..)

- Provide transportation for families to access these services when necessary

## **2. Elements of our Program that work particularly well and areas that need improvement:**

### **Work well:**

- Collaboration with Designated Mental Health Agencies (DAs)---specifically Washington County Mental Health Services (WCMHS) and an evolving relationship with Northeast Kingdom Human Services (NKHS). Allows Laraway to provide services under the umbrella of the DA and expands the geographical area served by the DA while providing high quality services with an extensive support network for clients and those providing the services.
- Coordination of services within Backpack and with school partners and families. Providing comprehensive services with a foundation in evidence-based practices, both clinically and behaviorally, helps schools and clients maximize services (Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors and Licensed Board Certified Behavior Analysts work collaboratively on each case).
- Multi-layered supports (interventionists, case managers, behavior analysts, therapists, foster & respite providers) as well as in-house crisis supports to wrap-around youth & family
- Intensive Family Based Services (IFBS), supporting families *early* who are at risk of separation to stabilize and move forward positively
- Creative approaches to therapy (art, music, sports, cooking, theater, photography, poetry, etc.) including youth-driven group and solo art shows in Laraway's small Gallery Space on our Johnson campus.
- Creating and raising money for a Crisis Fund to assist with immediate needs for shelter, food, clothing and fuel
- Restorative Approaches and Practices to address acts of harm and the impacts on all involved (offender, victim, community), rather than utilizing the criminal justice system
- Providing services where youth and families are located and/or providing transportation so they can access services (Laraway has five locations.)
- Partnering with businesses, churches, colleges and other partners in the community so youth can practice new skills in the "real world" while developing their own community connections and resources
- Our emergency pager system in Substitute Care (therapeutic foster care) is consistently recognized by youth, families, foster parents, and staff as a HUGE support. Additionally, case managers' weekly contact with foster parents and youth help support and maintain placements for our youth and their difficult behaviors.

### **Need Improvement:**

- Expanding access to funds that allow the Program to provide the quantity and quality of service it currently has capacity to provide

- Expansion of access to system of care for clients (developing an internal system that provides each new and existing client and family access and assistance accessing necessary services)-could be developed by having an agency Care Coordinator who has contact with all new clients throughout Laraway during the intake process and who connects them with services, and follows up to insure clients have realistic opportunities and means to access these services.
- Provide in-house substance abuse treatment
- Better coordinate transition plans and supports for youth becoming adults
- Offering more treatment activities. Overcoming youth resistance to these activities is a barrier, but should not be used as an excuse to not develop or offer more opportunities. In collaboration with our other programs and using skills and passions of staff, we could offer a rich menu of activities daily for youth to benefit from, build skills, explore interests, and meet treatment goals. Creating opportunities for youth and their families to participate together in therapeutic activities is a goal.

### **3. Ways the Vermont Legislature can help:**

- Advocate for increased resources for DAs to utilize private agencies to expand service delivery
- Develop mechanisms for private agencies to provide a greater array of services through more flexible and available funding
- Hold regular meetings with agencies across the state to assess the successes and challenges of providing care
- When possible, visit agencies and observe operations, facilities and environments
- Insure that reimbursement rates are adequate to maintain access to quality services, especially when multiple providers who utilize Medicaid funds are supporting a youth at the same time and potentially competing for funds
- Appropriately fund services for parents with addiction issues to insure timely access to cost-effective, proven treatment
- Limit barriers and regulations for programs and administrators. Less time is spent developing program opportunities for youth because of increased regulations and paperwork demands. Clinicians and trained and skilled staff who have the greatest impact with youth are dedicating more time to documenting services. Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) could potentially add barriers to continuity of care based upon impacts on program budgets.
- The introduction to the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) for our residential programs adds additional expenses and demands on staff without equal rate increases, reimbursements, or impact on youth treatment.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you. I invite you to visit to our campus in Johnson. I am happy to answer your questions.

