

Date: February 27, 2017
To: Vermont Senate and House Committees on Appropriations
From: Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights
Regarding: FY '18 Proposed Budget

VCDR is a coalition of non-profit organizations dedicated to promoting the civil rights of people with disabilities and policies that allow individuals to live independent lives. This often involves state supports that help people live to their full potential and so I appreciate the chance to come and let you know about several needs and issues that will profoundly affect the lives of your constituents.

In several key areas the proposed budget acknowledges an increase in need by accounting for caseload increases in long-term developmental and mental health services. It does not however, address the inflation of the cost to deliver these services and our designated and special service agencies often fail to deliver services with appropriate continuity because of the turnover of frontline workers. This has been a long-time problem that is hollowing out a system that is otherwise well-structured to help people live independently rather than in institutional settings.

In some cases, however, we have failed even to address caseload needs. An example of this is in the services for people with visual impairments who are served by the non-profit Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Eleven years without state increases to address the need for teachers, ride coordination and technology training has left a weakened system. Older Vermonters losing their sight might very well need to consider nursing home care for want of the inexpensive rehabilitative training that could keep them independent.

People with disabilities should be able to work towards independence and a decent life. Cuts in re-allotments of federal Vocational Rehabilitation funds are forcing DVR to cut staff at a time when the job market is hopefully making more opportunities available. I believe that some of the cuts had been held off through the use of Global Commitment funds and would ask if this is perhaps a viable way to prevent further erosion of our highly regarded VR system.

VCDR would point out that the meals-on-wheels program for people with disabilities under 60 has seen increasing demand despite our improving economy; a relatively small increase of \$20,000 would help mitigate a waiting list in the basic meal program administered by the Vermont Center for Independent Living.

Once again we see a budget that proposes cuts to legal services and health care advocacy delivered through Vermont Legal Aid. VCDR asks that these cuts not be enacted. Too many people with disabilities live in poverty, are victims of exploitation, have housing issues and other civil challenges that can only be equitably resolved with legal assistance. And who among us will predict that LESS assistance will be needed to navigate our unpredictable and changing healthcare marketplace?

VCDR would also ask that you again consider repealing what we would call the “disability tax” that was implemented to save state dollars by counting against the Supplemental Security Income of a disabled adult in a family with children that otherwise gets about half of what their basic needs are through the ReachUp program. It is stunning to hear rhetoric about Vermont’s “affordability” when we believe that people living right around the poverty level can afford to kick in about \$1,500 a year to help balance the state budget.

These are not the only needs that should be addressed for low-income people with disabilities, I am providing the committees with the VCDR platform that has a number of issues to consider. Not all of them, by the way, are budget related. We appreciate your consideration of your neighbors’ situations and of the opportunities that should avail to all Vermonters. We hope that we can work towards one Vermont in which our prosperity is shared. Thank you!

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.