

Testimony for Vermont State House Advocates Day, February 28, 2017

Representing United Nurses and Allied Professionals VT

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Thank you to the committee for inviting Advocates and allowing me to speak on behalf of my union, United Nurses and Allied Professionals (UNAP) which represents about 750 front line mental health and health care workers in Vermont. I am speaking to you today as a Children's Clinician at Health Care and Rehabilitation Services of SE Vermont, serving Windham and Windsor Counties.

At HCRS and elsewhere in the DA system my fellow employees and I receive low compensation, as compared to our VT colleagues in the health care field, or compared to our colleagues working for the State of Vermont or compared to those working in the schools. We have high caseloads and unsustainable workloads. We all wear many hats and constantly juggle to get our jobs done. There is high turnover. We know this because we are saying good bye to colleagues we wish would stay and have vacancies on our teams which we wait to fill, while our workloads increase as we help cover their cases as best as we can.

Beyond the impacts on our work and our job expectations, low wages mean we earn about \$10,000 less than our colleagues in comparable fields in Vermont as just listed. That \$10,000 would make a big difference and might allow those among us who are single parents to be able to better support their family, would help pay off our college and grad school loans, or save for retirement or assist our children with their college costs and maybe allow us to no longer work a second job to make ends meet. But most of all earning \$10,000 more would allow more of us to stay at our jobs and do the work we trained to do and the work we really love doing.

Turnover rates are as high as 30% in the Designated Agencies right now. This is the same high rate which triggered the Vermont Legislature to commission the 2004, 2007 and 2008 Designated Agencies Sustainability Studies. At that time, "the agencies considered staff retention to be one of their highest priority issues." (2007 DA Sustainability Study). The recommendation made was to "Take Additional Steps to Stabilize DA Workforce." The 2007 study suggested supporting competitive wages, reward longevity and assist with tuition expenses.

I am here to ask you to do your part in stabilizing our mental health, developmental and substance use workforce in the Designated Agencies by voting to support an increase in wages for DA direct care workers through a MEANINGFUL increase in the Medicaid reimbursement rate.