Subject:	RE: Budget Hearings and Free Clinics

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From: VT Coalition of Clinics for the Uninsured [mailto:vtcoalitionofclinics@gmail.com]
Sent: Tuesday, February 13, 2018 3:40 PM
To: Theresa Utton
Subject: Budget Hearings and Free Clinics

As you can see below, I now work for the VT Coalition of Clinics for the Uninsured (Free Clinics). We receive grant funding (50/50 federal and State GF) through the Health Department, which we believe has been level funded in the Governor's budget. We have provided testimony so far to House Health Care requesting an increase in our funding after 11 years of level funding and increased services provided by the clinics.

When is the right time/way for us to present testimony to the Appropriations Committee. I see that Thursday afternoon at 3:15 is a time for human services advocates. Is that when the Committee would like to hear about funding for health care free clinics? If yes, how will that work in terms of signing up? I was otherwise planning to come up from Middlebury on Friday, but could change that if Thursday is the best/only option.

Thanks very much,

Steve

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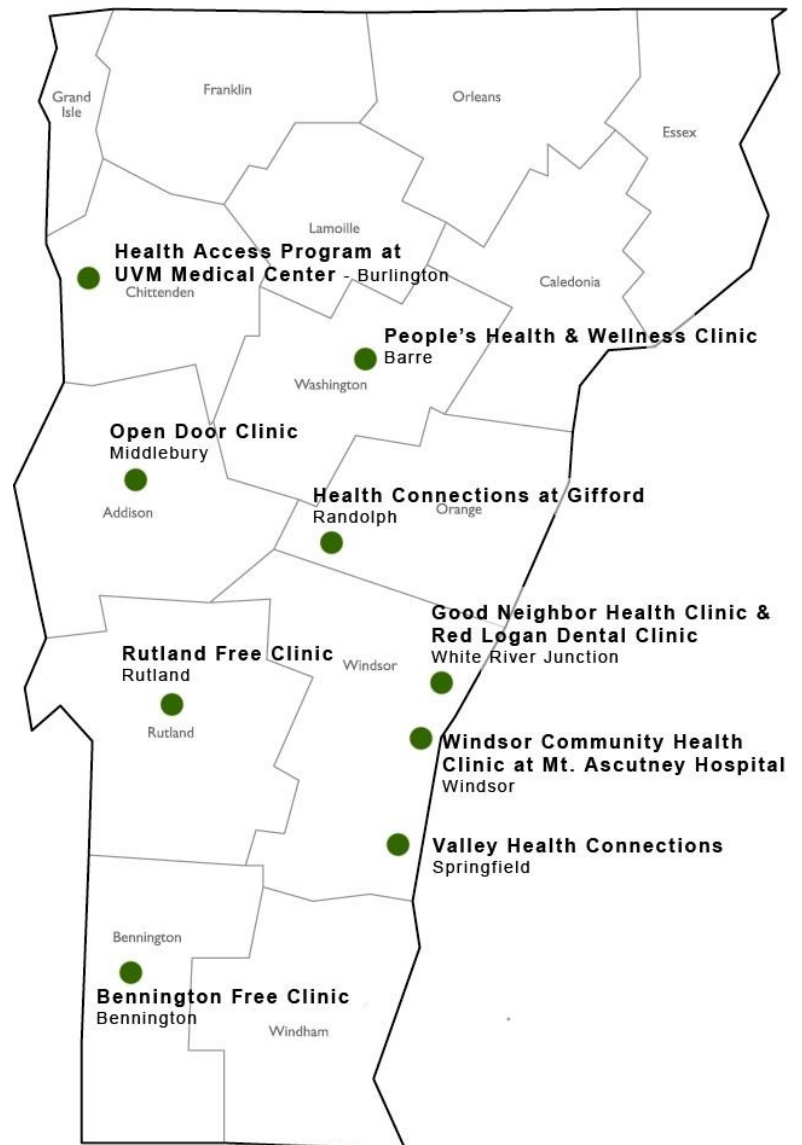**In the age of healthcare reform, why do we continue to need free clinics in Vermont?**

**Because not everyone is eligible; not everyone can afford it;
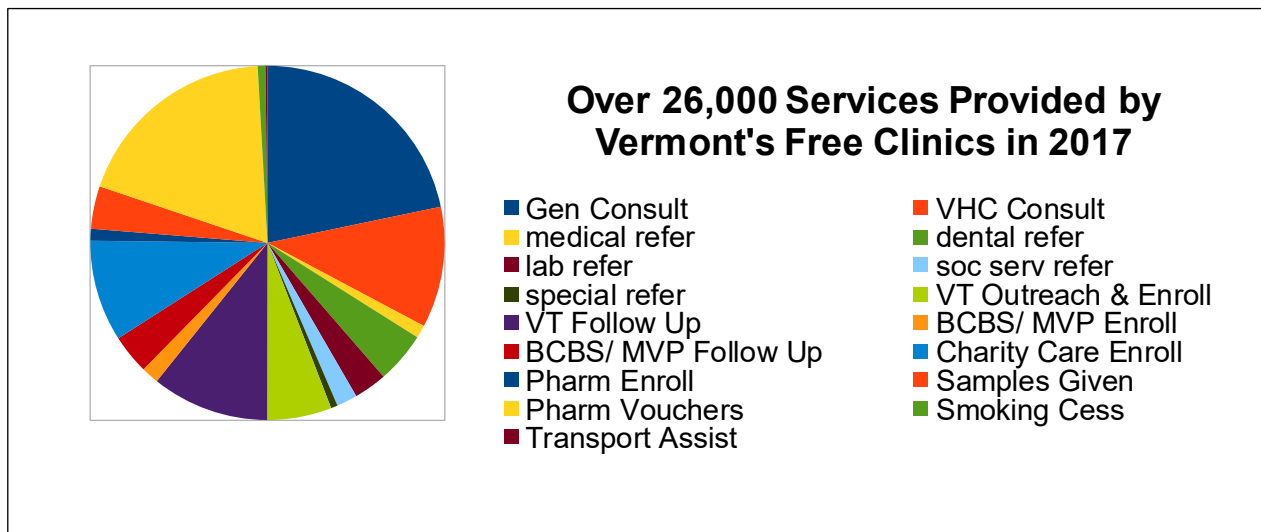and not everything is covered.**

Since 1997 we have served over 55,000 Vermonters. In the years since 2007 when Catamount was introduced we have seen a 72% increase in the number of Vermonters we serve. **Each year approximately 45% of our patients are NEW, meaning they have not been to our clinic before.** We know from our patient surveys that about 40% of those who choose not to enroll in insurance do so because they say the premiums and costs are unaffordable.

Our patients are usually employed, are at least high school graduates, and have a wide range of health access needs. They most often come to us on the referral of a health care provider or friends/family members.

In 2017, we assisted 7,831 Vermonters which was a slight decrease over 2016, but a 35% increase since 2010. We provided over 26,000 services to Vermonters in 2017, an increase of 30% since 2010.

VCCU clinics provided **4,584** medical and dental visits in 2017, worth **$610,000.** Equivalent ER care would have totaled more than **$3.3 million.**

Health Access Program at
UVM Medical Center - Burlington

People's Health & Wellness Clinic
Barre

Open Door Clinic
Middlebury

Health Connections at Gifford
Randolph

Good Neighbor Health Clinic &
Red Logan Dental Clinic
White River Junction

Rutland Free Clinic
Rutland

Windsor Community Health
Clinic at Mt. Ascutney Hospital
Windsor

Valley Health Connections
Springfield

Bennington Free Clinic
Bennington

Over 26,000 Services Provided by Vermont's Free Clinics in 2017

- Gen Consult
- VHC Consult
- medical refer
- dental refer
- lab refer
- soc serv refer
- special refer
- VT Outreach & Enroll
- VT Follow Up
- BCBS/ MVP Enroll
- BCBS/ MVP Follow Up
- Charity Care Enroll
- Pharm Enroll
- Samples Given
- Pharm Vouchers
- Smoking Cess
- Transport Assist

The Vermont Coalition of Clinics for the Uninsured (VCCU) is an association of nine free clinic programs, four of which also include dental programs, that provide care on site or by referral, and enrollment assistance free of charge to Vermonters without adequate medical and dental insurance. The clinics are located throughout the state and are supported by the tremendous work of volunteers, community hospitals, local fund-raising and an annual grant from the State of Vermont.

The programs help eligible people enroll in any of the Vermont Health Connect programs, including Medicaid, Dr. Dynasaur, BCBS and MVP, and if appropriate, provide health care either onsite or by referral until that program takes over. They also provide assistance with prescriptions, sliding fee scales, hospital charity care programs and other health needs.

There is never a charge or a fee for any of the services we provide. We leverage all the funding we receive with almost $4 million dollars of in-kind support from local hospitals, providers and volunteers.

Our mission is to ensure access to quality health care in Vermont regardless of one's ability to pay.

Our 9 Member Free Clinic Programs Include:

- **Bennington Free Clinic** - Bennington
- **Good Neighbor Health Clinic & Red Logan Dental Clinic** - White River Junction
- **Health Assistance Program at the UVM Medical Center** - Burlington- *Referral Services Only*
- **Health Connections at Gifford** - Randolph - *Referral Services Only*
- **Open Door Clinic** - Middlebury
- **People's Health & Wellness Clinic** - Barre
- **Rutland Free Clinic and Dental Clinic** - Rutland
- **Valley Health Connections** - Springfield - *Referral Services Only*
- **Windsor Community Health Clinic at Mt. Ascutney Hospital** - Windsor – *Referral Services Only*

The Need for Free Clinic Programs in an Uncertain Healthcare Landscape: Funding Increase of $340,000 Needed to Sustain Services

While healthcare access has changed for better and for worse over the years, there has been one unwavering resource for the most vulnerable Vermonters: the free clinic programs that make up the Vermont Coalition of Clinics for the Uninsured (VCCU). What started as a group of six clinics in 1994 has grown into a coalition of nine free clinic programs across the state that are always there for those who need us most. Though insurance, providers, facilities, and legislation come and go, the free clinic programs are constant and deftly adapt to the needs of those walking through our doors. **After years of level-funding, a recent loss of other funding, and a steady increase in demand, we are requesting an increase of $340,000** in our FY19 allocation through the Dept. of Health to sustain our services.

Since the coalition began, the need for greater access to care has continued to increase. In the last ten years **the number of Vermonters we served has more than doubled**, up from 3,594 in 2006 to 7,831 in 2017. The people who rely on the free clinic programs are diverse. Half have a high school education or less, approximately one third are employed at least part-time, one third are either retired or disabled, and one third are unemployed. 62% have income that is at 150% of the federal poverty level or less. We are serving people who are living paycheck to paycheck, and have a complex set of needs. Though the number of Vermonters with insurance has increased, so has the number of "underinsured" who can't afford their deductibles and co-pays, and we consistently see patients return after giving up their insurance. This sort of "churning" of people into and out of the State's insurance and support systems is common in the populations we serve and presents a baseline demand for our services. The free clinic programs also care for migrant farm workers and other undocumented individuals who will never be eligible for health insurance. With political uncertainties still plaguing the Affordable Care Act, **the number of vulnerable people in our state who need our services will continue to rise.**

The free clinic programs provide patients with the resources to meet their needs, from patient navigation of VT Health Connect to prescription assistance enrollment. Clinic work is funded through a variety of private grants, individual gifts and foundation support. A significant piece of clinic funding was provided through the Department of VT Health Access (DVHA) through a grant for navigation services. Federal and State Navigator funding has ended, but the work of assisting patient access to primary care and the right insurance program will not cease. In addition, funding to several of the clinics to support the work of the Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) program ended in June 2017. **Without an increase in our VDH grant funding, our ability to fill the gaps left by other providers and reduced federal programs will be significantly hampered.**

One of the benefits of our coalition is that VCCU **free clinic programs cover much of the state** from Burlington to Bennington. Coalition membership is comprised of the Bennington Free Clinic, the Good Neighbor Health Clinic and Red Logan Dental Clinic in White River Junction, the Health Assistance Program (HAP) at UVMMC in Burlington, Health Connections at Gifford in Randolph, the Open Door Clinic in Middlebury, the People's Health & Wellness Clinic in Barre, the Rutland Free Clinic, Valley Health Connections in Springfield, and the Windsor Community Health Clinic. Each is its own organization that serves the unique needs of its community. Five programs provide medical care on site with paid and volunteer providers and four provide referral services only on site. All provide a range of services that qualify them to be part of the coalition, including:

- Insurance enrollment assistance,
- Patient care coordination and education, and
- Referral to medical homes.

Day in and day out, staff help clients understand the insurance options available to them, often spending hours navigating them through complex systems and resolving a myriad of problems.   They sit with patients, learning about their lives and assisting them with finding social services, prevention and treatment programs, transportation, interpretation services, and much more. When a person comes to a clinic afraid and unable to afford their care, staff find every resource available and sign them up for prescription assistance programs, work with hospitals to get free or reduced cost lab work and screenings, and set up follow-up appointments. When the immediate situation is over, they work to get them insured and referred to a medical home. **Clinic staff are the experts who know how to solve seemingly insurmountable problems.**

Because our free clinic programs are independent, they are able to respond quickly as needs arise. Since **dental care has been out of reach for so many Vermonters** due to lack of dental insurance, lack of dental providers accepting new patients, and even fewer accepting new Medicaid patients, the free clinic programs in Barre, Middlebury, Rutland, and White River Junction embraced the challenge of providing dental services on site and have created networks of local dentists willing to take pro-bono patients. The Bennington Free Clinic, Valley Health Connections, and Windsor Community Health Clinic all purchase dental care for their patients. And since many Vermonters without dental care end up with teeth pulled because the cost of restorative work is out of reach, many of our free clinic programs have been working on finding funding for dentures, including a partnership with Catholic Charities and Affordable Dentures piloted by HAP in Burlington. The demand for dental care has been unrelenting and we expect it to continue to grow, further taxing clinic budgets.

To maintain the services low income Vermonters still desperately need, we are requesting an increase in our allocation from the state that funds the VCCU's grant through the VT Dept. of Health. The $688,000 we receive has been vital to keeping the doors open. However, after years of being level funded despite the growing number of people we serve and the complexity of their needs, we are asking the state to increase our allocation by $340,000 to a total of $1,028,000. The last increase to our allocation came in 2013 to support the Bennington Free Clinic's addition to the coalition, but we are now serving more people. **The work has grown, but the allocation has not.** The funds the state invests in our work are well spent with each $1 leveraging another $4, not to mention the tens of thousands of dollars saved when we engage patients before their health requires them to go to an emergency room. At a time when traditional healthcare costs have risen considerably year after year, **we have been fiscally frugal and are doing a remarkable amount with very little.** An increase in state funding is necessary to make sure the vulnerable people in our state do not fall through the cracks in uncertain times.

Sincerely,

Peter Youngbaer, Board President
Steven Maier, Executive Director
Vermont Coalition of Clinics for the Uninsured