

VERMONT LEGAL AID, INC.

OFFICE OF THE HEALTH CARE ADVOCATE

264 NORTH WINOOSKI AVE. - P.O. BOX 1367

BURLINGTON, VERMONT 05402

(800) 917-7787 (TOLL FREE HOTLINE)

(802) 863-7152 (FAX)

OFFICES:

BURLINGTON

RUTLAND

ST. JOHNSBURY

OFFICES:

MONTPELIER

SPRINGFIELD

Office of Health Care Advocate Faces \$50,000 Cut

The Administration's proposed SFY 2018 budget for the Office of Health Care Advocate (HCA) is \$50,000 less than the amount appropriated in SFY 2017. The House restored that funding and we ask that the Senate do so as well.

A budget cut of this magnitude will force a reduction in staff at a time when the HCA is already struggling to respond to the calls from Vermonters who need help.

- Call volumes remain at historically high levels, with more than 300 Vermonters seeking help last month alone.

We are all aware of just how uncertain the future is for the Affordable Care Act, Medicare, Medicaid, and other Vermont health care programs. It is particularly unsettling and frightening for Vermonters who receive Medicaid or rely on subsidies to cover themselves and their families. The anxiety that many feel today will only increase as the year continues and the President and Congress discuss proposed changes to the Affordable Care Act and reforms to Medicare and Medicaid.

The number of calls to the HCA will go up, not down, as changes are made first on the federal level and then here in Vermont. Vermonters will need the HCA more than ever as they try to make reasonable choices in a fast-changing health care marketplace.

The Administration's rationale for the proposed cut changed over the course of the House appropriation process, but never addressed the inescapable fact that call volume at the HCA will go up, not down, in the coming year.

This is not the time to leave Vermonters without the help they need to understand how changes that are coming in our health care system will affect their families, and this is not the time to diminish the consumer's voice at the health care policy table.

VERMONT LEGAL AID, INC.

MENTAL HEALTH LAW PROJECT

264 NORTH WINOOSKI AVE.
BURLINGTON, VERMONT 05401
(802) 863-5620 (VOICE AND TTY)
FAX (802) 863-7152
(800) 747-5022

OFFICES:

BURLINGTON
RUTLAND
ST. JOHNSBURY

OFFICES:

MONTPELIER
SPRINGFIELD

Vermont Legal Aid's Mental Health Law Office Faces \$44,500 Cut

The Administration has proposed a \$44,500 cut to the operating budget of Vermont Legal Aid's Mental Health Law Project (MHLP). The House restored this funding and we ask that the Senate do the same. The rationale for this cut changed several times during the House appropriations process. This cut was initially described by the Administration as "funds related to Tropical Storm Irene recovery" and no longer needed. Then, they identified it as "associated with rent at Vermont Legal Aid," but claimed that the rent was not needed because they had offered Legal Aid office space. Finally, the Administration acknowledged that it had provided either office space or rent for the Mental Health Law Project of Legal Aid for more than 30 years and had not, in fact, offered Legal Aid office space.

Pursuant to a contract with the Agency of Human Services, the MHLP is appointed by the Superior Court to represent anyone in Vermont facing commitment or involuntary medication. The MHLP also has a contract with the Department of Mental Health to pay for an independent psychiatric examination in each of these cases. This has been the arrangement for over 30 years.

In the aftermath of Tropical Storm Irene, the MHLP's offices in Warterbury had to be abandoned. The State of Vermont had always provided Legal Aid with office space, heat, electricity, maintenance, and telephone service at no charge. After trying to identify suitable state office space for five months, the State decided to pay Legal Aid to lease independent space directly. They added \$44,500 to cover this cost and added the funding to the DMH grant for providing psychiatric examinations. That \$44,500 amount has remained unchanged for the past three years.

The funds were never part of a "temporary Irene recovery plan," but were a base cost of providing constitutionally-required representation for those facing commitment. It is a cost the state has always recognized as its obligation to provide.

Mental health-related caseloads are higher today than they were when Irene struck, and the cost of handling these cases has risen, as those cases must now be handled all over the state. The state has not increased funding for mental health work in almost ten years. Rather than reducing funding for the MHLP's office costs, the State should provide a modest increase to cover the increased costs of travel and document production.

The funding that is threatened here is federally matched, so the state's general fund savings would only be **\$20,595**, rather than the full \$44,500 that Legal Aid will experience. Cutting that funding will lead directly to a reduction in services, equivalent to almost a half of an attorney position, as Legal Aid must still pay rent and other expenses to house the staff providing mental health representation. And given the size of our mental health caseloads, the resulting cuts will mean a reduction in services to low-income Vermonters whose services have been level-funded for 7 out of the last 8 years.