

**Testimony to the Joint Session of the Vt House and Senate Appropriations Committees
Public Budget Hearing – February 25, 2019
Connie Stabler, South Burlington, VT**

Thank you for holding this public hearing on the FY2020 budget. My name is Connie Stabler, I am from South Burlington, and I am a community board member at the Howard Center. I also have a son with schizophrenia who has received much needed and much appreciated services from the Howard Center for 13 years.

I am here to express support for mental health funding in the FY2020 budget. **Here are my specific requests for the FY2020 budget for improving mental health care:**

1. **Please support the designated agencies' request for a 4% increase in the FY2020 budget to continue to invest in their workforce in order to allow them to recruit and retain qualified staff, and to develop community services that reduce emergency room and inpatient bed needs. Consider "shifting the balance" from building hospitals to investing in community mental health care.** This would help get people discharged from the hospital sooner, relieve the long waits in the ER, and would keep people from even having to go to the ER.

I was glad to hear DMH Commissioner Sarah Squirrel say that the hospital data recently released indicates that most of those admitted to the ERs for mental health crises are discharged to the community, not to the hospital, and she proposed that the state put more resources into community services, not in more costly hospital beds. I also think that, when any additional hospital beds are built, they should be located in the northern part of the State. Despite stakeholders' support for distributing Level 1 beds across the state, none are located in Chittenden County (or north of it) where a significant number of the state's population lives.

2. **Please support the Governor's budget for replacing and expanding the Middlesex secure residential program.** This program was opened in 2013 and was intended to be temporary (2-3 years) until a permanent facility could be built. This facility consists of two double-wide trailers (7 beds) with a tiny yard located next to the state police headquarters. The Dept. of Mental Health recently reported that it is "failing" and "in dire need of replacement." The plan to expand it from 7 to 16 beds means that it will play a significant role in getting folks discharged from hospitals, and therefore help get more people out of the ER and into a hospital sooner.

In the last 2-3 years, funding for replacing the Middlesex facility was included, then removed from the budget. AHS Secretary Gobeille recently indicated that replacement of the facility is a priority, but the proposed funding for this next year is only for locating it and for planning. State Buildings and Grounds indicate that it will likely not be ready for occupancy for five or six years! After visiting the Middlesex facility, some legislators have pushed back on the state to escalate their timeline and I ask you to join them.

My son recently spent 1½ years at Middlesex because there were no beds available in the community that had the appropriate level of supports he needs to be safe and to keep from returning to the hospital. Before that, he spent nine months either hospitalized or in a private step-down facility for the same reason. He recently transferred to another step-down facility and still awaits placement in appropriately supported housing, which we hope will happen in a few months.

Just like you and I, my son and others like him deserve to have the freedom to live in and contribute to their communities, and to be where they can be closer to their families and friends – instead of being locked up in mental health facilities. This would also fulfill the Dept. of Mental Health’s mission, which is to “provide services to individuals in the least restrictive environment possible.” My son has received excellent care from the caregivers in the state-run facilities, but his life has been on hold for the past 2 ½ years because the state of Vermont has not been fulfilling that mission. His experience is far from unique. Please provide funding to help him and so many others like him get a chance to fulfill their hopes and dreams and be a productive member of society.

You may ask where the money will come from to support these requests? I suggest that when marijuana sales are legalized and taxed, you ear mark some of those revenues, not only for education and safety programs as has been proposed, but also to fund mental health care because it will be needed. Psychiatrists have urged legislators not to legalize it, and more and more research is showing that marijuana increases symptoms for those with a mental illness and can even trigger or cause the development of psychosis or schizophrenia and thus the need for more ER admissions and additional hospital beds.

I hope you will consider including an increase in community mental health services and a speeded up replacement of the Middlesex secure residential facility in your budget. Thank you very much for your consideration.