

**House Human Services Testimony  
DCF Commissioner Ken Schatz & Deputy Commissioner Christine Johnson  
March 31, 2020**

**Suite 12/Woodside Move**

On Sunday, March 22<sup>nd</sup>, DCF Family Services Division was approached by the Department of Mental Health with a request to utilize the building housing the Woodside program in Essex to provide an emergency response to adult psychiatric patients who become COVID positive. Northwestern Counseling & Support Services responded to a request by the Agency of Human Services with space they had available through a lease with Northwestern Medical Center and offered it to DCF in a temporary capacity to fill the need to house the 4 youth who were currently housed at Woodside. On Tuesday, March 24<sup>th</sup>, the youth were moved to the new staff secure program called Suite 12 in St. Albans.

Suite 12 is not a permanent solution. It is being stood up in a temporary capacity in response to a COVID emergency need to utilize Woodside for adult psychiatric patients. Because there were only 4 youth at the Woodside facility with a 30-bed capacity, the pressing need was to access the 30 beds to care for COVID positive adults with psychiatric needs.

The following items will help with an understanding of the program we are standing up in St. Albans:

- Suite 12 will be used as a placement for youth who pick up new charges and cannot be safely maintained in the community. The program currently is also able to accept youth who have CHINS status because it is not a locked facility. This allows us to also serve violent and aggressive youth who are not delinquents in this program.
- One shower is available for both staff and youth. We have reserved a hotel room in St. Albans to provide staff to use for both sleeping and showering. The hotel room will be available on-going. Staff are also able to use the shower at the program if desired.
- Fire safety- the Fire Marshall was been engaged at the State level. Fire alarms have been installed; fire extinguishers are also on site.
- Food service-Northwestern Medical Center is providing meals 3 times a day. We are supplementing meals with fruit, drinks, and snacks.
- Educational programming will start on April 6th-Kris Hoffman is leading the preparation and implementation efforts. Youth will attend school Monday-Friday.
- Staff are using their TIER (Trauma-Informed Effective Response) and Safe Crisis Management training to de-escalate and support youth. If the youth runs away from the program staff are not to restrain the youth in the community but are instead asked to call the police to respond.
- We are licensed for 5 beds effective March 24<sup>th</sup>.
- Recreation-Youth have access to Collins Perley Sports Center in St. Albans and will use the outdoor spaces there that include an outdoor track, basketball court and trails. Youth will be

supervised by staff at all times and will be allowed access to the community if they are deemed to be in a safe space at the time of the outing.

- The overnight staffing pattern is 3 staff sleep; 2 are awake at all times. Using staff in an overnight staffing pattern allows us to maintain a 56-hour shift with 2 cohorts of staff per week which promotes continuity of programming.
- Total number of staff who are actively working=25
- Two youth ran from the program Sunday, March 29<sup>th</sup>. One youth was picked up by BPD and was returned to the program. The second youth continues to be on the run. We are considering our options to relocate the program to ensure a locked or staff secure capacity.

**Foster Care System and COVID**

Data on calls to the child abuse hotline and intakes:

We have seen a 60% decrease in the number of calls to the hotline to report child abuse and neglect compared to March of 2019. We have also seen a 60-70% of those calls being accepted as intakes. This is on comparison to a historical average of 30% of accepted intakes.

Parent-child contact:

- The Family Services Division and contracted partners contacted all parents of children and youth in custody to arrange for virtual visitation whenever possible. There are approximately 30 cases where parents are requesting in-person visitation and we are using the screening questions to ensure safety of all involved which includes parents, children and youth, foster parents and FSD staff. If safety issues are a concern (e.g. report of illness or fever, exposure to someone with COVID) then the visit will not be done in person and the parents are able to file a motion with the court if they disagree with the decision.

Guidance for reunification of families:

- Guidance was provided to our staff to work to reunify children and youth with their families on an accelerated basis consistent with where we had reunification efforts already underway. This was done in an emergency response to COVID.
- Respite for foster parents is an area we are paying close attention to because our foster parents are in need of it in certain circumstances and also because we also want to ensure as few potential exposures as possible.
- We are working to determine if we can support foster parents financially with a stipend to care for a child with COVID.

**Residential System of Care Update**

COVID-19 is causing many residential programs in Vermont to reduce their capacity due to staffing shortages.

Program	Normal Capacity	COVID Capacity	Beds Available
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Allenbrook	8	3	Full
Brookhaven	8	5	Full
Community House	8	4	Full
Linden	8	2	Full
Abigail Rockwell	8	3	Full
Laraway Footebrook	4	0	Closed
NFI Group Home	6	2	Full
NFI Shelburne House	3	2	Full
Onion River	8	5	Full
Park Street	9	9	Full
T House	4	1	Full
VACN at Newbury	8	5	Full
VY School for Girls	25	17	Full
WCMH Programs	14	6	Full
Depot Program Bed	18	12	1 bed
Suite 12	5	5	5 beds after 3/27
Woodside	30	0	Closed

Most of our out-of-state residential treatment providers are no longer accepting new referrals. Many have committed to sheltering in place in the event of COVID positive youth in their program. In the event that youth become COVID positive and need a place to stay for a variety of reasons, we expect youth to be served in the AHS Welcome & Recovery Center in Plainfield, VT.

On March 16, 2020, there were 104 children and youth placed at in-state residential programs. As of March 25, there were 80 children and youth placed at in-state residential programs. The Districts and the SSU have facilitated over 21 unplanned moves for youth in group settings to home or foster care. There were several planned moves that were expedited to make sure the residential programs could adequately staff the youth remaining in their programs. The emergency discharge efforts included conference calls, treatment team meetings, education planning, and transportation efforts of our FSD staff were beyond extraordinary.

### **Older Youth Formerly in Foster Care**

The Youth Development Program (YDP) is providing case management and using their extended care options (extended foster care and youth investment funds) to help meet the needs of youth formerly in foster care. They are experiencing an increase in requests for financial support for housing and basic needs. They have received inquiries from volunteers offering housing and YDP is determining a process for vetting these potential “room for rent” opportunities.

This was an effort done in response to both colleges and universities closing their campuses and other needs of older youth in and formerly in foster care.