



Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council

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TO: Vermont House and Senate Committees on Appropriations
RE: Comments on the Governor's Restatement of the FY '21 Budget
FROM: Susan Aranoff, Esq., Senior Planner and Policy Analyst
DATE: August 27, 2020

Thank you for providing me this opportunity to comment on behalf of the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council (VTDDC) in response to the Governor's Restatement of the Proposed 2021 budget.

The VTDDC is a statewide board created by the federal Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights (the DD Act), first adopted by Congress in 1970. As stated in our 5-year plan, the VTDDC vigorously seeks changes in Vermont's many service systems so that Vermonters with developmental disabilities can access the supports and services necessary to foster community inclusion, self-determination, productivity, and independence.

The VTDDC supports a 3% rate increase for designated and specialized services agencies (DA/SSAs). We see this investment as a continuation of the excellent work that the legislature has undertaken during the pandemic to ensure the stability of Vermont's long-term care organizations during this very difficult time.

As you know, Vermonters with significant disabilities experienced a sharp reduction in their community support services when the state of emergency was declared by our Governor. The fact that many people with disabilities have one or more chronic health conditions¹ made this a critical step in maintaining the safety of this vulnerable group. However, this has also created a great deal of stress for people with disabilities who are now struggling with isolation, anxiety, and acute distress.

Recognizing the thin margin on which community agencies operate, the legislature moved quickly to ensure that retainer payments to the DA/SSAs were put in place. This has helped to ensure that as services slowly ramp back up, there are organizations with trained staff who are ready to provide these supports. Flexible payments to individuals and family caregivers have also helped to maintain stability during the early months of the pandemic.

¹ See Vermont Department of Health brief, https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/DisabilityDataPages_AccessibleVersion.pdf

However, more is needed. Agencies are carefully ramping some services back up. This process begins with an individualized risk assessment designed to identify the best course of action for each person in services, including addressing any increased mental health issues or other distress. We anticipate that this resource-intensive process will be ongoing throughout the pandemic.

At the same time, the DA/SSAs have been financially strained by Covid-19 in many ways, including:

- The need for enhanced training, equipment, and resources to re-initiate services safely.
- The sharp rise in demand for telehealth services and emergency interventions due to increased stress, substance use, and isolation. The need for these services is expected to last long after the pandemic is over.
- Increases in domestic abuse, homelessness, food insecurity, and other effects of the pandemic and the economic downturn.
- Workforce challenges created when staff need to retire or take a leave of absence due to their own health concerns or to assist a family member at high risk of complications from Covid-19. Recruiting and training new staff to replace these workers involves substantial training costs, as well as the need to offer competitive compensation packages.
- The reduction in school contracts and revenues which were critical in sustaining the agencies' full continuum of care.

The budget before you level funds existing services provide by the DA/SSAs. When inflation and the costs associated with operating during the pandemic are considered, this is effectively a cut.

The financial challenges faced by the DA/SSAs before the pandemic have not gone away. Historically, Developmental Services has been underfunded, with the rate of reimbursement bearing little resemblance to the actual cost of service delivery. As other health providers and state government continue to increase wages, staff at the DA/SSAs fall further behind, resulting in high vacancy and turnover rates. At the same time, agencies face rising costs for health benefits, information technology and equipment upgrades, and Covid-19 related expenses like PPE and cleaning. During this public health emergency, it is even more important that the legislature act to close this gap, rather than open it wider.

In summary, a 3% rate increase is necessary to ensure the continuation of high quality, accessible services that promote safety, education, employment, stable housing, and strong, healthy families and communities. DA/SSAs are a critical – but often overlooked -- part of our health infrastructure reducing hospital utilization, involvement with law enforcement and corrections, and addressing rising overdose and suicide rates.

Please help to ensure that Vermonters with disabilities can maintain their health, productivity, and community engagement now and in the post-pandemic future.