

Theresa Utton-Jerman

Subject: Written testimony on proposed 2021 budget-

Hello,

I am writing to submit written testimony regarding the Mental Health Outreach Program Expansion (H.961).

As a mental health professional myself, I have significant concerns about the expansion of the non-profit mental health and police programs. I have worked intimately with these programs in Windham And Windsor county, and my concerns lie in the degree of coercive and carceral approaches that both police and mental health systems use in the name of community safety and support.

I understand that the police are increasingly being asked to respond to mental health and substance related issues in the community, and I appreciate that the State is brainstorming ways to support community safety and unburden the police from responding to mental health issues. Unfortunately, our current clinical mental health services too often resort to traumatizing interventions and carceral institutionalization that prioritize compliance and obedience with medication and behavioral plans over actually addressing the human needs present.

I highly recommend that you reconsider this plan, and consider requiring peer support workers and programming instead of mental health workers. Peer support as a modality brings compassion, lived experience, recovery wisdom, and deep understanding to the issues that those in our community who are at risk of police intervention are facing.

I also encourage the State to consider limiting any oversight of these collaborations to the designated agencies, rather than the Department of Corrections or police forces. It is already a great burden to expect mental health or peer support staff to work alongside police culture; imbedding these positions in police work runs too high a risk of increasing carceral culture in mental health, which is already a concerning culture trend that must be broken.

Vermonters who are psychiatrically labeled, experiencing crises, using drugs, living with homelessness, or otherwise needing support do NOT need social workers to help them navigate carceral options (hospital or jail), they need peer support from someone who can understand what they are going through and commit to relationship building and resource navigation.

Please reconsider this proposal and associated funding. Our State's police do not need to extend their reach into mental health culture. We need to increase support and funding for an alternative model of care and support. I urge you to transfer the funding associated with this proposal to Peer Support programs and services.

Peace,

Emily Megas-Russell, LICSW