



**United Nurses &
Allied Professionals, Local 5051**
Elizabeth Mueller, President

February 6, 2020

Senator Jane Kitchel, Chair, Senate Appropriations Committee
Representative Kitty Toll, Chair, House Appropriations Committee
Statehouse
Montpelier, VT 05602
Also sent via email

Dear Chairs Kitchel and Toll:

My name is Elizabeth Mueller. I work at Health Care & Rehabilitation Services of Southeastern Vermont (HCRS). I am a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor; I am also the President of the clinician's union at HCRS. We are the direct care workers at HCRS.

First, on behalf of the direct care workers that I represent, I want to thank you and your colleagues for your continued work supporting Vermont communities as well as all Community Providers seeking to support individuals/families of Vermont.

I am reaching out today, specifically, to encourage you to consider additional and ongoing support of direct care mental health workers. Over the years I have been working in Vermont, there have times when Medicaid reimbursement rates have been increased. Increases, have been designed to improve the sagging wages and salaries of direct care workers, and otherwise enhance recruitment and retention efforts at the designated agencies. Within language of prior rate increases, funding was directed to be used to provide compensation for direct care workers. Such as the following:

“The funds allocated in this act shall be used to increase the amounts paid to designated agencies and specialized services agencies. Of this amount, **priority shall be given to total compensation of direct care workers** and non-executive staff.¹”

When this language was added to the Appropriations Act, direct care workers actually received an increase in compensation.

¹ Please see Act 172 of 2016, Section E.300.5 - Designated and Specialized Agencies; Rate Increase.

As you may be aware, low compensation is one of the largest contributors to high staff turnover. As an agency, when we cannot retain staff or recruit staff, quality of care for consumers is greatly affected. Quality of care is based on long-lasting, trusting relationships. These relationships are disrupted by staff turnover. High turnover also fragments teams and makes the goal of team integration more elusive. High turnover creates waiting lists. Clinicians are pushed to have larger caseloads and clients must wait to see the psychiatrist. High turnover means that everyone on the team wears many hats just to keep services running and fill in the gaps.

Recently, direct care workers received a 2% in 2019 and a 2% raise for 2020. However, 2% increases do not keep up with inflation, the cost of education and/or the cost of living. Most direct care workers have a second job just to make ends meet. Salary levels of both bachelors and masters level staff continue to be well below comparable staff in other health and human service agencies, as well as state employees. The work that we do at HCRS is essentially a state responsibility. However, while state employees continue to receive COLAs, step increases and generous health benefits, HCRS staff compensation does not even keep up with inflation. At the same time, our staff are being asked to do more, and work with people with more complex needs.

For these reasons, I respectfully request that the House and Senate Appropriations Committees again consider including the following language like that of FY 2016 Budget Bill:

Sec. E.314.5 RATE INCREASE

(a) Revenue generated from the Medicaid rate increases in this act shall be used by designated agencies and specialized service agencies to provide a commensurate increase in wages for direct care workers. Such increases shall not be offset by wage increases due under a collective bargaining agreement. Each designated and specialized service agency shall report to the Agency of Human Services how it has complied with this provision.

Again, I want to express our appreciation for your attention to this issue and thank you for your continued service.

If need be, I may be reached at elizmuell13@gmail.com; or 413-626-707076

Respectfully,

Elizabeth Mueller, LCMHC
President, UNAP Local 5051

C: Members, Senate Appropriations Committee
Members, House Appropriations Committee