

Theresa Utton-Jerman

Subject: FW: Public Hearings on the Fiscal Year 2021 Budget the Vermont House and Senate Committees on Appropriations

From: Katherine Connolly

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I am writing as a parent of a child who has received services for 20 years and as a board member of the Howard Center. Our son was diagnosed with a severe mental illness which subsequently contributed to a developmental disability when he was nine. His prognosis was grim but his outlook has been remarkable.

He graduated from the SUCCEED a joint venture of Howard Center and UVM which teaches living skills. He lives in a supported environment with staff and sometimes uses Safety Connection to be in his apartment independently. Project Hire helps him work at the ball park and the grocery store. He pays taxes, navigates public transportation, uses the library, the parks and the YMCA. He participates in Special Olympics all year. Earlier we saw glimpses of the beautiful person trapped inside. Now that person shines.

How did we get here? Howard Center provided community based services including clinical, educational, vocational and supports. The system was flexible enough to adapt as his needs changed.

Howard Center is one of 14 designated agencies that provide clinical care, community supports and crisis services 24 hours a day to individuals and families with developmental disabilities, mental health and substance abuse needs.

Howard Center has remarkably creative and successful partnerships with local law enforcement, hospitals and local government. These initiatives provide community based care as alternatives to prison or inpatient treatment.

According to statute Vermont mental health should be adequately funded and sustainable to the same degree as other health services but the system has been insufficiently funded for many years. The proposed budget this year allows for no increase in funding. In order to sustain our work with individuals in the community, to fully meet the increase in developmental services caseload, and to sustain our partnerships we are seeking a three percent increase in funding.

This funding will be used to attract and retain staff. We consistently lose staff to schools, hospitals and the state. All three of these entities rely at least in part on state funding. We cannot compete with those salaries. As a result we have staff vacancies in one of every 5 clinical positions and 400 vacancies system wide.

We realize that the state provided additional funding over the last few years to address this inadequacy and we are very grateful for your help. However, our wages are still woefully below market. The resulting turnover is expensive and adversely affects those needing our services. The resulting mental health system, treatment in a prison or inpatient facility, is much more expensive. The real cost is the quality of life those individuals and families lose.

Please help us keep our community based services, our innovative partnerships and stable workforce by providing additional funding in this budget. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Katherine Connolly