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Dear members of the Joint Legislative Justice Oversight Committee,

Given the recent negative messaging surrounding Woodside lately, I felt it important to convey to you what the Woodside staff have been going through for much of this year. It is my hope that you can appreciate the trials we have faced and support us as we move forward.

I have had the privilege of working with tremendously dedicated and talented staff at Woodside for 27 years. Over the years we have earned national praise, fostered relationships and shared positive experiences with hundreds of the most difficult youth in our state.

This past year has been tough as you know. We have faced the prospect of closure, three interim leadership changes while waiting for a qualified candidate the settlement calls for, three moves, numerous staff departures, a pandemic crisis and the list goes on. I hope you can understand the organizational strains we have felt, yet have endured, as we continue to show up to work each day, willing and able to try and help the youth who have been placed at Woodside.

Added to these circumstances are the numerous examples of difficult behavior we have encountered and successfully deescalated, without any seclusions, this year. For example, over a 26-day period this summer, we recorded 46 examples of resident behavior resulting in the destruction of property or worse. Incidents we faced resulted in numerous staff assaults and some injuries among residents and staff. Some of these incidents are described as, "Kicked and broke door window (resident injured heel during this), rams unit door with chairs. escape attempts, breaking windows with rocks, covers both West Unit cameras with door covers, tries to pry faceplate of electric switch, jamming locks with plastic, removed screws from wall, weaponizing and threatening staff, destroying exit signs, ripping off metal door handles and breaking window glass with them, destroying unit equipment, inciting riots, damaging speaker wires."

This is only a partial list as our records guy stated that due to all our chaos and staffing issues, all incidents may not have been recorded. Typically for every behavior like the ones described above, there are other significant behaviors we also experience (Yelling, Banging, etc) so you can image how many of these behaviors staff successfully de-escalated during this tumultuous 26-day period, much less throughout the year.

The very few times we were not able to deescalate, we had to resort to calling the police or going "hands on" as we call it. We never take this lightly and our restraint numbers have been extremely low over the years (For example, only 3 between July 2019 and June 2020). We also had to learn a new restraint technique which has been difficult to sufficiently practice during the conditions we have faced (These difficult conditions have also been noted by Vermont's

Assistant Attorney General David McLean.) This new restraint technique is not an easy one to administer and there is some debate as to whether it can be successfully used with our population. We have not seen it effectively applied in extreme situations during the trainings we have been a part of and the trainers have also noted limitations of this technique with the youth we serve.

Thus, we have not always been able to effectively use this technique and we have received some bad press and agency displeasure as a result. My hope is that you have a better understanding of what we have been going through. We have not given up on trying to effectively use the new physical restraint and hope that we can continue to be of service to the State of Vermont as state employees. We have proven ourselves over the decades and see a risk in privatizing our services. Please do not outsource this valuable resource you currently have.

If you have any questions about any of the concerns raised about Woodside, please let me know.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Matt Messier

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