

Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Testimony

Joint Fiscal Committee

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Elizabeth M. Sightler

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President, Vermont Care Network

I am Beth Sightler, executive director of Champlain Community Services, a Specialized Service Agency in Colchester, Vermont, and the President of Vermont Care Network – part of the Vermont Care Partners – a partnership of the 16 designated and specialized and designated agencies.

We appreciate you, your time, and your work as well as our collaboration with the state of Vermont. While we don't face budget cuts this year a level-funded budget *IS* still a cut to our service system at a critical time. We are requesting a **three percent increase (\$4.8 Million dollars)** to the essential mental health and developmental disabilities system. I understand there is a lot of pressure on the budget – so, here's why:

The risk of acquiring Covid-19 is no less today than it was in mid-March and the people we serve are at a very high risk. **Most of our decisions these days have to do with finding dollars to keep people safe; and every one seems existential.** Our agencies have never stopped caring about how to deliver meaningful, creative, life-saving and flexible programs. It's important to remember that we're *both* a celebrated *service* system and an exceptionally complex, often unrecognized long-term *healthcare* system. Since the start of the pandemic we've encountered new costs around personnel, training, safety, IT, programming, crisis, healthcare, and infrastructure. Agencies have set up tents, provided safety equipment, developed personalized service, provided flexibility for staff hit hard by the pandemic, developed safety and crisis protocols and locations - and taken on significant financial risk in the process.

In the last quarter of FY`20 Agencies accessed needed federal and state CRF dollars and **appreciated short-term flexibilities** provided by the state. **Important flexibilities end this Saturday and access to future supports is not guaranteed.**

I understand that I am asking at a difficult time; I appreciate your pressures and your consideration. These Vermonters cannot be put at further risk, especially right now.

Respectfully Submitted,

Elizabeth M. Sightler