

Report to the Vermont Senate Health and Welfare Committee:

Senator Lyons and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to come and speak on behalf of Gifford, our FQHC, our primary care services, and our patient population.

My name is Joshua White. I am an Emergency Physician by training and currently serve as the CMO for Gifford Medical Center and Gifford Health Care. I have been employed here since 2010.

Gifford is uniquely poised as an FQHC tied to a hospital, one of very few throughout the country. It is our belief that this structure provides us the opportunity to provide an exceptional model of integrated care that promotes a very high quality of health care at a local level while addressing uniquely local needs and containing costs. Our patient population ranges from the well child visits to pediatricians to nursing home and end of life care. We have demonstrated our abilities as recently as last week, when an obstetrical patient suffered hemorrhage and required initiation of a mass transfusion protocol. She received 11 units of blood, transported to us by a State Trooper who braved the blizzard. Our obstetrical team worked diligently to correct the problem, and our hospitalist team managed a patient that by all measures should have been cared for at a tertiary care center with an ICU. Winter snows prevented ambulances from travel and she remained at Gifford. I am proud to report that both she and her infant did very well. Upon discharge from the hospital, she will remain in the Gifford system and will be managed as one of our primary care patients, with her child entering our pediatrics clinic. All of this is possible and made more efficient while being kept local because of Gifford's position as both an FQHC and a hospital.

We believe that primary care is the foundation of integrated quality care, and that health is more than the absence of disease. We have employed various strategies to achieve these ends, focusing on community outreach, wellness, and disease prevention. As we sit here now, a speaker from the Vermont Department of Health is engaging with students at the technical center in Randolph about the dangers of vaping. This problem has been described as an epidemic by regional Principals, and in response, Gifford has brought these education efforts to our schools. Dr. Courtney Riley, a pediatrician in the Gifford system, developed an anti-bullying program and we are engaging with schools to implement this. Gifford has sponsored alcohol and drug education community wide. We work towards addressing food insecurity, supporting local food shelves and will be bringing free vegetable markets to Gifford on a monthly basis starting this spring. These are just a few of the efforts made by our staff over the last year in support of community health.

Unfortunately, recruitment and retention continues to loom as a massive challenge to central Vermont and is a constant threat to undermine our efforts. We are acutely aware that we compete on a national basis for providers, and that individuals leaving medical school frequently carry loans that total in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Those individuals have the opportunity to choose locales from California to Minnesota to Florida. Making rural Vermont attractive to them is inherently difficult, and legislative measures such as loan repayment to address this challenge are critically important. Recruitment and retention challenges permeate throughout the system, to include nursing and medical

assistant staffing. As a critical access hospital, we must compete with large regional healthcare systems offering large sign on bonuses. This environment results in attrition and vacancies in positions that make it incredibly difficult for our primary care providers to provide efficient and high quality care. Management of a complex medical patient in an abbreviated clinic visit is nearly impossible when providers are forced to train a new nurse and new medical assistant every few months.

Finally, Gifford has made a commitment in support provision of mental health services to our patient population. The demand is massive and resources are slim, as reflected in countless media stories on local, State, and National Levels. This arena of health care has long been neglected, as the health care payment system has chronically underfunded mental health services. Subsequently, depression, suicide, and substance abuse have reached crisis levels and our primary care providers struggle to provide a stop gap. Our efforts to address this need have been hampered by the workforce challenges I have mentioned, and our job postings for mental health professionals sit for months without response.

As the current legislative session and budget hearings proceed, I implore you to keep these realities in mind. We are devoted to our communities here in rural Vermont. We have pledged to continue our efforts, but our impact on the lives of your constituents and the citizens of Vermont could be so much greater with your assistance.