

COVID-19's Impact on Brattleboro's School for International Training (SIT) Testimony

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Greetings from southern Vermont and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you all at this extremely challenging time for the School for International Training or SIT and for all of Vermont's independent colleges due to COVID-19. I also want to thank this committee for considering the House of Representatives' recommendation of relief funding for our independent colleges. These are extraordinary times. Thank you for considering extraordinary measures.

I am Dr. Sophia Howlett, President of SIT in Brattleboro. SIT was founded in 1964 and is an accredited higher education institution. SIT is an active member of AVIC. According to Vermont's Department of Labor, we are the largest vocational and training school in the state. We are the largest institution of higher education in Windham County and the 6th largest employer according to Think Vermont.

We believe in the power of diversity, the importance of an intercultural perspective, and fostering openness and understanding. Through our Graduate Institute based in Vermont, our semester-long study abroad programs across the world, and our certificate programs for professionals, SIT prepares students to be effective leaders, professionals, and citizens. Unlike some of our fellow AVIC members, SIT is a non-traditional higher education institution. Most of our students do not physically reside on our campus, and our activities extend from high schoolers all the way through our students' professional careers. However, like all our fellow members, we rely heavily on tuition-based revenue to transform the lives of young Vermonters.

Our alumni are community leaders helping each day to make Vermont a better place for all of us. They include: Rick Berkfield, the cofounder and executive director of Food Connects, HB Lozito, executive director of Out in the Open which connects and empowers rural LGBTQ people in Vermont; and Steffen Gillom, president and cofounder of the Windham County chapter of the NAACP and a member of the Governor's Racial Equity Task Force.

As a trailblazing and quintessentially Vermont organization dedicated to promoting international education, our business model is in the bullseye of COVID-19. As the pandemic began to spread, we found ourselves racing to bring home more than 900 students from 36 countries at an added cost to the organization of over \$650,000. SIT is no stranger to world wars, civil wars, and natural disasters, but COVID-19 has been a truly unprecedented challenge.

Financially, we worked quickly in March to respond to that challenge: stewarding our money effectively to prepare for a difficult Fall including participating in the federal payroll protection program. But now here we are in September, and as we are all very aware good stewardship and an effective business model has limits in our present context.

In Fiscal Year 2019, our tuition-based revenue was \$48.4 million. This fiscal year, our expected tuition-based revenue is \$3.5 million, a 93% drop in revenue due solely to COVID-19 as we are unable to send young Americans on our transformational programs. SIT's revenue losses have been the highest among AVIC members, accounting for roughly a third of the total lost revenue. Our consequent restructuring efforts have directly affected 52 of our Vermont staff, and we now have 130 employees based in Vermont supporting our mission and programs. Despite this, SIT remains a significant employer and economic driver in southern Vermont. Indeed, our independent colleges together employ over 9,000 people.

Our combined AVIC revenue losses amount to over \$144 million and SIT alone is in need of \$5.6 million in relief as this crisis extends towards Winter and Spring. None of us have been eligible for relief from the State before, despite this serious need.

As you know, the House has recommended \$10 million in Coronavirus Relief Funding for the independent colleges. Clearly, \$10 million divided among AVIC's 11 members will not solve all our problems, but it will certainly be critical especially when combined with our ongoing individual efforts to restructure and cut costs.

We all recognize this is a time of extraordinary disruption and transition. It's vital for our survival to adapt. SIT is doing just that and at the same time we are guided by our "Good neighbor policy". We have reached out to Windham County at a time of economic devastation to bring our talents and experience home. We have set up virtual internships and are partnering with the Community College of Vermont and others to support workforce development. We have partnered with state and local officials to provide dormitory space for exposed first responders and frontline health workers; and offered back-up to the Department of Children and Families for day care and after school services. Even as we struggle with serious revenue losses and remain very concerned about the prospect of further layoffs, we continue to look for ways to help our community even as we look to you all for a helping hand.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share with your committee a snapshot of how COVID-19 is affecting SIT, and thank you for considering urgently needed relief of \$10 million for Vermont's independent colleges. I strongly believe, and hope you do as well, that we are vital to the economic health and success of our state now and in the future.

I would welcome any questions.