

June 11, 2020

Senate Education Committee

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### **Testimony on the School Indoor Quality Emergency Grant Program**

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony on the proposed School Indoor Quality Emergency Grant Program.

We appreciate the efforts of Senator Perchlick to take the initiative on this and also acknowledge the assistance of former VSA School Energy Management Director Norm Etkind and staff from Efficiency Vermont, along with others.

VSA Executive Director Jeff Francis asked us to express his regret that he can't be here today. Jeff has a long-standing meeting with the Tax Structure Commission, but he shares our appreciation for this work.

Norm had a successful tenure at VSA working to assist districts with efficiency measures and is well-regarded by superintendents and facilities personnel. Similarly, Efficiency Vermont is well known and has been a valuable partner with school districts as well.

We have divided our comments into three sections: Overall reaction to the proposal; specific observations and recommendations; and context within the operational navigation and funding resources associated with COVID-19.

As background, we have tried to follow the evolution of the program design. Senator Perchlick has been good about seeking input and we know that Norm reached out to a variety of folks as the program elements were considered.

Leaders among school facilities managers have met on several occasions during the last month to discuss the proposal and their input informs this testimony.

Bruce is going to speak to the reaction to the program overall and the specific observations and recommendations. Peter will address the overall context and funding considerations.

## **Comments on the Program Overall**

Facilities managers and VSA agree that the overall concept for the program is sound.

A program that will support the improvement of HVAC systems is both useful and timely in light of considerations associated with the return to school this fall and the need to have safe and healthy learning environments.

The program design emphasizes inclusivity (all schools would be eligible); focuses on the need to optimize existing systems and recognizes that the overall costs of system optimization and upgrade will likely exceed available resources.

### **Specific Observations and Recommendations**

Facilities managers focused their review on three areas - the timing and pace of the program, the capacity to perform the work - both in terms of demands on school personnel and the capacity of contractors and the scope of the program.

With respect to timing, with the Governor's announcement yesterday that schools will open this fall, the time for the anticipated work to occur is short. The logistics of accomplishing the work will be challenging, as contractors are contending with the re-start of their own business and school personnel are faced with unprecedented complexity and work as they work to contend with a huge array of decisions, actions and resource needs. HVAC needs are an important piece of the effort, but just a part of all the work that needs to be done.

Short timelines and lack of time and available personnel will impact not only the ability to conduct the work but all the steps that need to be taken to prepare to perform the work - for EVT, for the contractors and for school administrators and facilities personnel. There are competing demands on this time.

Regarding capacity, facilities managers wonder whether there is sufficient capacity in the HVAC industry to respond to demands quickly enough in light of the timing.

In his testimony to the Committee on September 9, Bill Root raised practical observations about the ability to get the work done on the timelines anticipated. He also noted that contractors are backlogged and facilities managers are seeing multi-week delays for certain mechanical equipment. This acknowledgement is not intended to discourage moving ahead - but they are legitimate concerns and observations.

With regard to scope, we understand that the program is intended to make existing HVAC systems function to the best of their capacity. That is the right approach. That stated, some systems are in a condition where major work will be required.

We also support the provision to waive bidding requirements associated with the work that will be funded through this program.

As far as specific recommendations, we took note of the intention to provide schools with a CO2 monitor and want to suggest that Relative Humidity Meters be provided as well. We also think that Air Flow Hoods should be eligible for acquisition under the program.

Facility managers understand the current challenges with procuring basic items like filters, so we recommend advising school districts to order such items as soon as possible.

We also believe that school districts with greater in-house capacity would benefit from the ability to address HVAC needs with their own staff to the extent possible, thus leaving greater field capacity for the schools less well-equipped. Facilities Managers could provide a list of needs to Efficiency VT for review.

In order to optimize capacity facility managers wonder if a useful approach would be to employ a basic HVAC survey that can be completed by onsite maintenance staff. The survey could be designed to create a baseline of the type of services that will be needed (ie. age of the system, types of controls, types/number of units) and which contractor would be the best at completing the scope of the project at each school. Insufficient information from the survey would initiate a field visit from Efficiency Vermont.

We also suggest that in the authorizing legislation that school facilities managers be added to the group that will be engaged in the design of the program.

### **General and Funding Considerations**

One central consideration, in our view, is funding - both with respect to how much funding is needed and how an allocation of funding for this program might impact necessary funding in other areas.

As we sit here today, we can't put a number on the costs of preparing to re-start school or on the cost of operating in the school year ahead.

For the last three months, we know that the pattern of spending for school districts was altered. We were required to continue to pay people while expenses in some areas increased and in others decreased. To the best of our knowledge, the state does not have any reliable information yet on how much extra has been spent or what may have been saved.

Going forward, we don't have good cost projections nor do school districts yet know what will be available to them.

In Tuesday's discussion in this Committee it was indicated that there would be an overall \$25 million allocation for schools with \$12 million already accounted for. In the House, committees are working on an allocation plan for the entire \$1.25 billion in Coronavirus Relief Funds. We know that the exact utilization of ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funding, which is supposed to be destined for local schools, is uncertain.

At the local level we do not know how needs, requirements and available funding are going to be reconciled - so at that this point we are hoping for maximum flexibility in terms of resources - even as we acknowledge compelling and critical needs.

With the importance of HVAC systems generally, it would make sense to make the greatest investment possible, but possible should be determined by the amount of money available in the context of competing needs. To the best of our knowledge, that information has not been settled yet.

More information is needed on the overall funding picture as it is reconciled between the House, the Senate and the Administration, before final dollar amounts for this program should be determined.

Again, thank you for your work on this initiative and for the opportunity to provide this testimony.