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## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** House Committee on Appropriations  
House Committee on Health Care  
House Committee on Human Services  
House Committee on Corrections and Institutions  
Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Senate Committee on Health and Welfare  
Senate Committee on Judiciary

**FROM:** Mike Smith, Secretary, Agency of Human Services

**DATE:** April 16, 2020

**RE:** Agency of Human Services COVID-19 Response

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The Vermont Agency of Human Services, at the direction of Governor Scott, has worked with agencies and departments, community partners, the health care system, and the General Assembly to respond expeditiously to the spread of COVID-19 in Vermont. The unprecedented action that has taken place would not have been possible without the tremendous coordination and flexibility of all parties, and the commitment from all to prepare and respond to this pandemic. The Governor's State of Emergency declaration set in motion a strategy for the containment, then mitigation of the spread, and a snapshot of some of the strategies and actions are outlined below.

### Governor's Priorities for COVID-19 Response

#### 1. Flatten the Curve

- "Flattening the Curve" was a multi-pronged effort that focused first on containing the spread of the virus, and then focusing on mitigating the impact of the spread. There was never any doubt that Vermont would not be impacted by the virus, and by focusing on containment and mitigation action, the state has been able to flatten the curve, and now is better positioned to handle a surge in COVID-19 related health care needs. Actions taken to flatten the curve include:
  - o The Vermont Department of Health (VDH) issuing guidance to health care providers on how to prepare for COVID-19 in their communities on January 23, 2020.
  - o Guidance issued to long term care facilities on March 5 explaining best practices and how to prevent the spread of the virus in a facility and between facilities.

- A coordinated effort with the Department of Public Safety, the Health Operations Center (HOC), and State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) to acquire personal protective equipment (PPE) early and secure a consistent supply chain for testing materials. Consistency has allowed for a ramp up in testing, and health care sites not having to worry about scrambling for supplies.
- The Department of Health has ramped up contact tracing, including bringing in personnel from the Department of Public Safety, to quickly track individuals that may have come into contact with a COVID positive individual. The ability to quickly trace contacts has better helped the state to understand where outbreaks may occur and alert individuals to the need to stay at home and avoid possibly spreading the virus.
- Restricting access to only essential persons to long term care facilities and correctional facilities. Reducing the number of individuals into a facility, reduces the probability of the spread of infection.
- VDH has continued to provide up-to-date guidance to all Vermonters. Guidance that clearly articulated social distancing, proper handwashing, activities to undertake while maintaining social distancing, and much more. The guidance has been a critical piece in educating Vermonters and has been integral to our ability to flatten the curve.

## 2. Lift the Line

- “Lift the Line” is the ongoing effort to increase and sustain capacity across the entire health care and social services system to meet the increased demand caused by COVID-19. As we saw around the United States and around the globe, the virus crippled health care systems furthering creating further spread of the infection, and the state took immediate action to prevent that from happening in Vermont.
  - The Department of Vermont Health Access (DVHA) quickly expanded Medicaid access to the uninsured and opened a Special Enrollment Period to off the opportunity for Vermonters to enroll in a qualified health plan.
  - DVHA has temporarily waived financial verifications for those seeking to enroll in health ensure and will not be reviewing Medicaid enrollee’s eligibility requirements during the State of Emergency
  - The State waived provider eligibility requirements to ensure that health care professionals from other states and retired health care professionals, that were in good standing, could practice via telehealth or in a state licensed facility.
  - DVHA has waived all co-payments for COVID-19 testing and all COVID-19 related outpatient services.
  - The State has worked with the Vermont Association of Hospitals and Health Systems (VAHHS), community health and social service providers to ensure they maintain operations by providing financial assistance to providers experiencing financial hardship as a result of the State of Emergency.
  - The Departments of Mental Health (DMH) and Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living (DAIL) have worked with the Designated and Special Services Agencies and

adapted program policies and funding to ensure community-based services are sustained through the pandemic.

- The Department for Children and Families (DCF), DMH, and DAIL have worked with the State Emergency Operations Center to ensure there are supports for Vermont's most vulnerable. These supports include expanding emergency housing, COVID-19 isolation locations specifically for vulnerable populations, and moving youth out of Woodside Juvenile Rehabilitation Center and moving individuals out of the Middlesex Therapeutic Community Residence for greater capacity and surge bed flexibility.
- The Agency has worked with the Vermont National Guard and VAHHS to set up surge bed capacity across the state to ensure that our hospitals and frontline health care workers do not become overwhelmed with a surge of COVID-19 related needs
- DCF, in consultation with the Agency of Education, worked to rapidly setup child care capacity for COVID-19 essential workers. The workforce would have been greatly impacted if parents were unable to have safe, reliable child care while they confronted the spread of the virus
- DCF worked to provide financial relief to the child care facilities around the state, as well as increasing subsidy payments, in an effort to keep the child care system operational when Vermont returns to normal day-to-day operations
- The Department of Corrections took steps early on to prepare for the possible spread of the virus within a correctional facility. The St. Johnsbury was prepared, in coordination with the Department's of Health and Building and General Services, to ensure that the facility was properly prepared to receive inmates that have tested positive and make sure staff were trained in PPE use and virus spread mitigation procedures.

### 3. Defeat the Virus

- "Defeat the Virus" is the final priority and would be predicated on total containment of outbreaks, getting Vermonters back to day-to-day lives, and begin the economic recovery process.
  - Vermont is still focused on the ongoing containment and mitigation of the spread of COVID-19, but we must begin looking ahead to recovering from the pandemic. The previous two priority's while important for the ongoing support of Vermonters, are also critical with the state's ability to quickly recover and not have a collapse of systems across the state.
  - The Agency of Human Services has begun the process of evaluating how to "restart" the state. It is important that this effort begins now, so the state can be thoughtful in re-opening businesses and day-to-day activities in a healthy and safe manner.

### Current Activities

- The Agency of Human Services, through the Business Office, is working with our federal partners to understand the impact of federal legislation and federal financial packages that continue to be rolled out across the country. The Business Office has tracked the support that is

needed in the community and will work Agency of Administration to ensure that federal dollars are provided in an expeditious fashion.

- The Department for Children and Families continues to coordinate with the State Emergency Operations Center to setup up recovery sites for Vermonters around the state. The Isolation and Recovery Center is currently operating out of the Holiday Inn in South Burlington.
- The Department of Vermont Health Access (DVHA) has made a wide variety of COVID-related changes to the Medicaid program. These changes remain critical to the state mission to provide health coverage to Vermonters, as well as flexibility and financial relief to health care providers. While these changes have happened rapidly, DVHA has tracked these changes throughout the process and will continue to evaluate their impact as well as any and all impacts from legislation passed by Congress.
- DVHA has seen a significant uptick in call center call volume, but the call center is keeping up with calls and meeting service level agreements.
- The Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living (DAAIL) continues to work with community-providers to coordinate and educate on new guidance that is rolled out by the Department for Health. DAAIL is working to make sure all community-based providers have the information they need to request personal protective equipment (PPE) and ensure that those requests are fulfilled in a timely manner.
- The Department of Health (VDH) will continue to ramp up testing and tracing abilities. Vermont now has more access to facilities to process testing kits and the time it takes to turn those tests around and back to the state. The state will ramp up aggressively testing nursing homes, senior housing, correctional facilities, secure mental health facilities, and other facilities that support vulnerable populations. This work is in coordination with Vermont's hospital system and the pop-up testing sites located around Vermont.

We will soon begin the process of getting Vermont back to normal business, but any work to reopen businesses will only be done with guidance from public health experts. We are thankful that Vermont has seen positive signs that are actions have mitigated the impact of COVID-19, and we have been incredibly fortunate for the sacrifices that Vermonters have made to protect themselves, friends, family, and neighbors. There are tough decisions still to be made, but the Agency of Human Services remains focused on doing everything we can to support Vermonters through this entire process. The Vermont General Assembly has been a great partner during these extraordinary times and we look forward to continuing to work together to help Vermonters get back on their feet.