

Theresa Utton-Jerman

Subject: Opposition to the Middlesex Replacement Facility

Hello,

I am writing in very strong opposition to Vermont's investment in the Middlesex Replacement Facility. I am a licensed clinical social worker who has worked in and served as Program Director for mental health residential facilities in Vermont. The proposed expansion of locked facilities in which involuntary interventions such as restraint, seclusion, and forced medication occur is a harmful and traumatizing solution that does not address any of the root causes of severe mental health issues and instead worsens them.

This very large sum of money could be so much better invested in consensual, voluntary, and humane facilities and programs that actually center the needs and experiences of those suffering from mental health crises, such as peer-run mobile crisis programs and home-like crisis or "freak-out" spaces, increasing equitable access to housing and economic viability.

The argument for these carceral psychiatric facilities is often a fear-based and misguided belief that people struggling with severe mental health issues are violent. We know from the research that these individuals are actually more at risk of being victims of violence than perpetrators, and it's high time that we recognize what the United Nations already has, that involuntary hospitalization and involuntary medication are violent and traumatizing interventions, often causing more harm than good and perpetuating the problems that individuals experiencing extreme states face rather than solving them.

When I served as the Program Director for 5 residential homes for folks with severe mental health needs in Vermont, we welcomed individuals who had been involuntarily hospitalized and medicated in locked units into an unlocked, much less coercive residential environment without the use of restraint, seclusion, or forced drugging. The fact that someone is deemed in need of involuntary hospitalization (psychiatric incarceration) and given medication against their will, then the next day can succeed in an unlocked environment without hands-on/forceful intervention, greatly weakens the arguments for the necessity of these harmful institutions in which state violence occur.

I implore you to reconsider this investment. Yes, not supporting this project may feel scary and like going against the grain, but it is that kind of bravery and boldness that we need. Vermont is proud of being progressive and on the cutting edge in so many ways; expanding carceral mental health programs works against the liberatory and transformative Justice that so many in our state and across the country are calling for. We must stop with the status quo, and worse, the trend towards increasing punitive and traumatizing "treatment" and actually start listening to the people most impacted and addressing root cause issues.

Please DO NOT support the funding and development of the Middlesex Replacement Facility. Think not about your political position, but about the human lives this affects and the power you have to impact real and bold change.

Thank you for your consideration,

Emily Megas-Russell, LICSW
Brattleboro Resident, Psychotherapist and Consultant

If you are interested, I was a co-facilitator for a recent Brattleboro Safety Review process that culminated in a large report about community members experiences with safety, danger and harm. Many many folks shared about experiences with mental health institutions- it may be worth your time to read through those sections of the report and our key findings and recommendations around decoupling mental health from police/carceral responses:

https://www.brattleboro.org/vertical/Sites/%7BFABA8FB3-EBD9-4E2C-91F9-C74DE6CECFD%7D/uploads/CSRT_Final_Report_12-31-201232.pdf