

Testimony to Senate and House Appropriations Committees
Public Hearing on the FY23 Budget
Julie Tessler
Vermont Care Partners
February 9, 2022

The History – The Dream of Parity has been Deferred

For far too long Vermont's Designated and Specialized Service Agencies (DA/SSAs) have been left behind while state government has supported its own workforce and infrastructure with annual increases for wages, health benefits, IT systems, and other costs. DA/SSA Medicaid rates are insufficient and not in parity with other health providers.

COVID Pandemic – Demand for Services at All Time Highs

During the Covid pandemic substance use disorders and mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression and suicidality have increased for children and adults, especially for people with disabilities, students, families, and isolated older Vermonters. The demand for DA/SSA Services has never been higher and will not subside any time soon because trauma has lasting effects.

The Result – A System of Care in Crisis

- FY22 turnover rate of DA/SSAs averaged 31%, with DS program turnover rate at 45%
- DA/SSA staff vacancies at 20%, developmental disability (DS) vacancies at 50% or higher
- One DS Agency has folded
- Staff are over worked and exhausted, some are working over 100 hours in a week
- Quality of care, quality of life and safety of vulnerable Vermonters is at risk
- Staff are leaving for better pay and less risk at fast food and retail establishments
- Some residential and crisis beds programs have had to reduce hours or even close
- 342 Children are waiting for services for up to 6 months
- 437 Adults are waiting for services for up to 9 months
- Lacking access to care, too many children and adults wait in emergency departments
- 88 people with developmental disabilities are waiting for shared living homes
- Too many students are struggling without behavioral, emotional, and social support

The Solution – Now is the Time to Act

- Increase DA/SSA Medicaid rates by 10% in FY23 and continue catch up over the next 3 years until DA/SSAs achieve parity with state employees and health care workforce
- Once funding parity is achieved, require the Administration to set predictable scheduled rate increases aligned with state employees and healthcare
- Develop and expand educational opportunities, such as tuition assistance, scholarships, and loan repayment for workforce development, include DS staff
- Implement strategies in Health Care Workforce Strategic Plan and direct further focus on mental health, developmental disability, and substance use disorder workforce