

Testimony of Hal Cohen
House Education Committee
January 7, 2022

Hi! Good Afternoon. For the record, I'm Hal Cohen, I live in Middlesex. I am the Executive Director of Vermont Adult Learning and I'm here to testify on behalf of the 4 Adult Education and Literacy providers in the state which includes the Tutorial Center in Bennington County, CVABE providing services in the 3 counties of central Vermont, NEKLS which serves the 3 counties of the NEK and VAL which serves the remaining 7 counties - FGI, Chittenden, Addison, Rutland, Windsor and Windham.

We have asked for a one-time budget adjustment appropriation of \$350,000 for FY 2022 to address current-year deficits. All four Adult Education and Literacy providers are facing deficits in Fiscal Year 2022. This collective deficit would be significantly larger if we had not already made significant budget adjustments that reduced the cost of our operations. To keep budget deficits from growing even larger, we have reduced staffing, delayed filling vacant positions and we have reduced our space and space costs.

The Adult Education and Literacy Network's budget adjustment request of \$350,000 to the Appropriations Committee represents a real, immediate need for Vermont's designated Adult Education and Literacy providers. Despite already stripping our operations to bare bones, a \$350k deficit still exists. Contributing to this deficit are 3 significant factors that include:

1. Unprecedented program costs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example to move to remote learning we had to purchase new software, pay for internet services for our students and buy many of them ChromeBooks or laptops.
2. Receiving a 3% cut (\$108,150) in FY21 grant funding. This was part of the Governor's initial 8% recession that eventually was reduced to 3%
3. Significant revenue loss in our High School Completion Program commencing with the March 18, 2020 "Stay Home, Stay Safe" Executive Order, requiring us to close our learning centers across Vermont. We quickly shifted to online remote learning and currently offer hybrid services, but our ability to access HSCP funding remains significantly below pre-pandemic levels.

Our Work Changes Lives. Vermont's four non-profit Adult Education and Literacy service providers offer a broad range of services that build assets and change people's lives. Our students are at the center of our work, and we know that success looks different for every student, which is why our programming and activities are specifically tailored to each student's unique needs and goals.

Vermont's Adult Education and Literacy students are often the most vulnerable and underserved of our communities. The majority of our students live in poverty, have a disability and/or experience homelessness or unemployment. Almost 1/3 of our students identify as a person of color. Many of our participants are the Vermonters who lost jobs due to COVID or have school-aged children for whom they may have had to resign to provide care. Many Adult Education and Literacy students are parents and have school-age children and lack the technology, skills or resources to work or learn remotely.

The work we do specifically meets the state goals and population outcomes that Vermont has prioritized. To achieve these goals we:

1. Provide learners with educational services of the scope and rigor for attaining a High School diploma.
2. We prepare Vermonters for getting good jobs that pay livable wages. We work with our students on attaining soft skills and give them the opportunity to include career training as part of their H.S. requirements to get a diploma.
3. We give young people who leave H.S. – drop out – who have many life barriers, a safe place to learn and a flexible educational experience that is tailored to their individual needs.
4. We have an important impact on the state's economy. An educated workforce is an employed workforce. Our graduates often remain in Vermont, forming the backbone of our local economies and communities.

Like many other service providers, Vermont's Adult Education and Literacy Network faces serious budget pressures that threaten the quality and accessibility of our services, especially during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike other state partners, we have not received any funding from the state to help with COVID related expenses. Providers across the state have made difficult budget cuts and are still operating with a deficit for the current fiscal year and expect deficits to continue into the next fiscal year. Meanwhile, the people that most need the services and supports that we provide are also being left out of the mix when it comes to accessing educational opportunities, upskilling for better jobs, or even simply going back to work after losing a job during the pandemic.

Please help us maintain the important services that we are providing to vulnerable Vermonters by supporting our request to the Appropriations Committee of \$350,000. Thank you so much for making the time to hear my testimony.