

Testimony to Senate and House Appropriations Committees
Public Hearing on the FY23 Budget
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February 14, 2022

The state of mental health services in Vermont, is in crisis, as it is in the United States according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the U.S. Surgeon General, Vivek M. Murthy, M.D.

The impact to the kids and families is due in part to the staffing challenges in publically funded mental health agencies(i.e., the DA/SSA system administered by DMH). Testimony of Vermont Care Partners today describes challenges of the system. The testimony today of direct care staff at NFI is similar to that of other VCP agencies, and provides a glimpse of the experience of potential staff. One NFI staffer testified he quit his job at a gas station to work at NFI, but took a pay cut to do this work he is passionate about.

Human Resource Directors, Anne Bilodeau, of HCRS and Jen Trombly, of Clara Martin Center with Julie Tessler of VCP testified that there is a turn over rate of 31% and vacancy rates of 20% and more in the agencies. This means that functionally approximately 50% of staff positions are vacant or have staff in them who are still learning their job duties.

In addition, testimony described that VCP agencies compete with physical healthcare entities and education entities for staff. most of these staff have received extensive training – usually for 2 or more years at a VCP partner agency. After obtaining licensure (which takes 2 or more years) VCP staff are recruited to physical healthcare or educational agencies for salaries 50% to 100% higher than those of VCP agencies.

This needs to stop because this increases the cost of those mental health units of service across providers by 50 to 100%. The cost of healthcare is already accelerating at an unsustainable rate. In addition, mental services are optimally provided by a mental health agency.

A multi-year plan is essential to attract and retain staff at mental health agencies. This process should include the following components:

1. 10% increase in funding to DS/SSA's in SFY 2023 with flexibility to focus on salary and benefit increases and increases to operating expenses including rents, interest, food, etc.
2. 5% increases in funding to DA/SSA's for SSFY 2024 and 2025 with the same flexibility as in SFY 2023.
3. A planning process to begin not later than 12/2023 to develop an ongoing plan for funding guaranteed annual increases in funding indexed in some manner with funding increases for state provided services including salaries and other operating expenses.

4. Reimbursement rates for Group psychotherapy and Group therapeutic activities be increased to incentivize group based therapeutic activities. This is necessary because the numbers of kids and families is increasing enormously. And the needs of consumers has never been so intense.
5. Reimbursement rates for Family therapy including conjoint family therapy be increased to incentivize family therapy services. As in no. 4 above, the number of participants in family therapy increases the therapeutic impact of any each practitioner. In the coming years the system will need to optimize the impact of all qualified providers in order to meet the tsunami of demand.
6. Payment reform measures should shift to funding services for families not individuals. Families are the fundamental building block of society. They are the place young children get their essential needs met and learn life long relationship patterns. Bundled payments allows for us to move into the 21st century in funding services to support families.

After my signature block, I am including written testimony from a staff member of NFI who was not able to provide oral testimony at Friday, 2/11/2022's committee meeting. Her name is Ann Flynn. She sent this as an email to the committee members. My apologies if this is repetitive.

Respectfully submitted,
Chuck Myers, Ph.D.
Executive Director
NFI Vermont, Inc.

From: Ann Flynn (NFI VT)

Sent: Friday, February 11, 2022 11:47 AM

To: lgoldman@leg.state.vt.us; LHoughton@leg.state.vt.us; wlippert@leg.state.vt.us; ablack@leg.state.vt.us; eburrows@leg.state.vt.us; mcordes@leg.state.vt.us; wpage@leg.state.vt.us; elong@leg.state.vt.us; apeterson@leg.state.vt.us; BCina@leg.state.vt.us; adonahue@leg.state.vt.us

Subject: Testimony about the dire challenges of the children's mental health system here in VT

Vermont's Health Care Committee Members,

I am a newly hired member of staff with NFI Vermont, Inc. now seeing firsthand the struggles that mental healthcare providers and their support systems have gone through for the past two years.

How it used to be; children around constantly seeing their therapists or part of a group; staff present all day every day not working remotely: conferences, events, fundraising activities cancelled: clinicians not holding meetings in-person; job applicant numbers dropping from around twenty a day to about seven-ten as a high mark. How the staff coped with the beginning of COVID; finding PPE, making their own hand-sanitizer and disinfectant wipes. The

Administration team keeping current with changing mandates to keep not only our staff safe, but also children in our schools, those meeting with clinicians, our hospital diversion program, and our residence homes.

The commitment of the people I have gotten to know (from the highest ranking person to the “lowest”) are a special group who take into consideration the needs of others while continuing to do those things that maintain a regular office the hiring of people, benefits, payroll, ordering of supplies, maintenance of buildings, making sure our bills are current. I am proud to now be part of a system that helps people in need. We also need help and continued support.

I ask that you prioritize the \$22.7 million dollars for Vermont’s Mental Health system in the budget adjustment proposal. Please hear our message; there is an urgent need for action. I have received many more calls from people looking for help and while I know that we still do our best to find someone to work with them. There are so much need not only within our organization but other Vermont organizations. The need is stretching the support we can give.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Ann Flynn
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