

From: Denise Niemira <dniemira@comcast.net>
Sent: Tuesday, March 29, 2022 5:41 PM
To: 'Jane Kitchel' <jane45@hotmail.com>
Subject: supporting mental health in the NEK

Dear Senator Kitchel:

I am writing to you as a member of the Appropriations Committee regarding the funding of mental health services in Vermont. I am a resident of Newport, Vermont, a retired family physician and the current Board Chair of Northeast Kingdom Human Services.

As a former private practitioner in the area for some 35 years, I have witnessed at first hand multiple mental health and substance abuse crises as well as the types of mental health problems that routinely present to primary care. While some problems I witnessed were comfortably within my scope of practice, others required a higher level of care and a backup system. Northeast Kingdom Human Services with its psychiatrists, therapists and counselors was my backup. It stepped in after patients who overdosed as suicide attempts were ready to be discharged from the ICU or the alcoholic patients had detoxed and were ready to leave the hospital. It also stepped in when patients I had been treating for less acute but personally disabling symptoms failed to respond to my treatment. I was grateful for what NKHS did but expected/wanted more.

As a member of the Board of trustees for 2 ½ years and as its current Chair, I now understand how unrealistic and short-sighted my expectations were. As a Designated Agency NKHS provides care to multiple populations. In addition to its office facilities it operates 4 licensed Residential Care Homes (19 beds total), a licensed Therapeutic Community Residence (5 beds) and 6 staffed-living homes (9 beds), the latter mostly serving individuals who have engaged in criminal activity but cannot be adjudicated because of intellectual disability or severe mental illness. The costs of operation of these facilities in terms of food, fuel and maintenance have risen more than 3% and it is difficult to see how further operational efficiency can be achieved without impacting quality or limiting services.

NKHS employs a staff approaching 500 individuals. Staff members work hard in positions that are often stressful with high turnover and vacancy rates. NKHS competes with private industries who offer higher entry level wages and a system that offers higher compensation to therapists in private practice. In such a climate, it is hard for NKHS to attract and retain the staff it needs.

The pandemic has only intensified these financial and personnel challenges. NKHS is not the only designated Agency facing the dilemma of how to address a need that is growing with funding that at best is stagnant and chronically does not reflect cost of living increases.

The ask is a 10% increase in DA/SSA Medicaid rates for FY23 and continued catch up over the next 3 years until DA/SSAs achieve parity with state employees and health care workforce as well as expansion of educational opportunities and reimbursement for workforce development.

I realize that we will be competing with other asks and a budget that cannot accommodate all requests. I would ask you to consider, however, how the state can deal with the acknowledged mental health crisis generated by the pandemic without adequately funding those who are there to address it.

Thanking you for your consideration,

Denise A. Niemira, MD