

S. 197 - An act relating to the Coordinated Mental Health Crisis Response Working Group

Testimony

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Department of Public Safety

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Thank you for hearing my testimony today. The Department of Public Safety is committed to continuously improving how we respond to people who are experiencing a crisis. This is evident from the ongoing modernization work at VSP as well as the fact that DPS created my position, Director of Mental Health Programs, which is a clear indicator of our commitment to this work. When I was asked to take on this work within the Department of Public Safety, I was tasked with two major pieces for me to focus on. The first task was for me to coordinate and finish setting up the embedded worker program within the State Police barracks known as Mental Health Crisis Specialist Program (MHCS). When I came on at the end of August 2020, there were four MHCS embedded within these barracks. As of last week, we had hired nine MHCS and we should have all barracks covered shortly. Part of my work involved insuring fidelity across the state in these positions through coordinated supervision and trainings. The second task I was asked to take on by the Commissioner was to help lead DPS in developing and implementing an alternative response to people in crisis that may not include an armed law enforcement response. I prefer to use the term “crisis” by itself instead of the term “mental health crisis” since many people may find themselves in a crisis due to substance misuse, traumatic brain injuries, age related diseases (eg. Dementia) and others not necessarily due to a mental illness. Regarding developing an alternative response, I have already begun engaging with individual stakeholders. I have engaged folks from Vermont Psychiatric Survivors, NAMI, Mad Freedom, Disability Rights Vermont, Vermont Family Network, Vermont Federation of Families with Children with MH Needs, Vermont League of Cities and Towns, Green Mountain Self-Advocacy, Vermont Center for Independent Living, and many more. We are ready to begin coordinating group meetings of these stakeholders. This group of stakeholders would be too large to work efficiently, and it is the intent that a subgroup would be formed to dig into what types of responses are being used in other states and countries and what could possibly work in Vermont. It is highly likely that it would not be a one size fits all solution since our state has both extremely rural areas and more urban areas and there may need to be different types of responses in different areas of the state. As I have started this work and committed to completing it, we do not feel that a legislatively mandated study group is needed at this time,

and what we feel might be helpful to us in this process would be funds to engage a consultant/subject matter expert to help both inform the process and also help us to implement the changes.