

Date: April 7, 2021

To: Senate Health & Welfare Committee

From: Susan Ridzon, HealthFirst Executive Director

Re: Independent Primary Care Practices



Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the topic of primary care. A strong primary care system is foundational to Vermont's quest to decrease healthcare costs and improve quality. Yet, primary care is in crisis. Primary care, particularly independent primary care, is stressed financially, administratively, and is subject to severe workforce shortages. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these extreme challenges and is hastening practice closures.

By May 2021, there will be only 26 independent primary care practices remaining in our network. This is a 21% decline from the peak, and we expect more closures within the next 3 to 5 years. Since 2015, 15 independent primary care practices have closed, the majority in rural areas (listed below). Insufficient payment was a primary contributor to each of these closures. Practice sustainability, as well as recruitment of new primary care physicians to replace retiring ones, is very difficult and often impossible at current payment levels.

- Henry Southall, MD (Lamoille)
- Mountain Valley Medical Clinic (Windsor)
- Mousetrap Pediatrics (Franklin)
- Franklin County Pediatrics (Franklin)
- Max Bayard, MD (Franklin)
- Green Mountain Family Medicine (Rutland)
- Good Health (Chittenden)
- Winooski Family Health (Chittenden)
- Paul Rogers, MD (Lamoille)
- Newbury Health Clinic (Orange)
- Irish Springs Internal Medicine (Lamoille)
- Susan Shull, MD, PHD (Chittenden)
- Judith Steinberg, MD (Chittenden)
- Gordon Geig, MD, PLLC (Chittenden)
- Christine Northrup, MD (Chittenden)

Continued loss of independent primary care practices will decrease Vermonters' access to care and will lead to increased costs and lower quality. It is vitally important that Vermont take steps to preserve and expand the number of primary care practices. We need a multi-pronged, multi-year approach that includes payment increases, workforce recruitment and retention incentives, and the prioritization of primary care in Vermont's move towards value-based payments. For specific recommendations, please see 4/7/21 testimony from Jessa Barnard of the Vermont Medical Society.

About HealthFirst

HealthFirst is Vermont's independent practice association representing physician-owned primary care and specialty practices located across ten counties in Vermont. We estimate that approximately 85-90% of the independent practices in Vermont are HealthFirst members.