

SENATE INSTITUTIONS COMMITTEE
DISCUSSION ON NEWBURY FACILITY
REPLACEMENT OF WOODSIDE JUVENILE REHABILITATION FACILITY
TESTIMONY OF SHANNON VIOLETTE

January 13, 2022

Hello everyone

My name is Shannon Violette and I have been a Family Services Worker with the Department for Children and Families for approximately two and a half years. Prior to that, I worked for the department in different capacities, including my social work internship in order to earn my bachelors of social work from UVM in 2019. My role at the department is what we call in my office an “intake worker”. An intake worker investigates or assesses accepted reports of abuse and neglect.

With that being said, I’m here today to speak with you, not as an employee of the department, but as a member of the public and a VSEA Union member.

I’ve thought a lot about what I wanted to present today and how I wanted to present it, but ultimately realized, I could present you with all the specific numbers and data I know, but no one has shared specific anecdotal stories of the crisis situation we are currently facing in the district offices. And maybe that is just as important as data and numbers.

Even as a front line worker, the impact of not having enough juvenile and youth services in the state of Vermont, has had a trickle down effect into every aspect of the work family services does. I spent my entire workday yesterday on how to support a youth who was too unsafe to be home and mom was too unsafe in the way to manage these behaviors. Mom kept begging me to get her daughter support in a residential mental health facility so that her child could get treatment for some of the unsafe behaviors she displays. I had to address the unfortunate news with her that this was not a reality for a present moment placement option, as there are months waiting lists for facilities like this. Because to simply put it, there are no facility placements available on a true emergency basis.

When I had to write a CHINS petition asking for a judge to make an emergency decision on whether a youth was unmanageable or not, the planning for how to support this youth was unimaginable. It is not as simple as one thinks right now, as all emergency beds are even full. We have discussions about which youth can maybe be removed from their program to accommodate another youth who may “need it more”, and which youth is more than likely going to be able to be safe back in the community. This is an impossible task trying to juggle who’s

mental health is better or worse than someone else's at any given time. Because all of them need to be there but our system can't support all of them right now.

While our entire system of care has been impacted with lack of resources, the one system that has been impacted significantly is the juvenile justice system and the lack of a secure facility. Prior to Woodside closing, judges could send both youth with delinquent status and what policy calls CHINS(C) youth (Youth defined by statute as beyond their parents control **and/or** presents a safety risk to themselves or others). Now these youth are being placed at facilities that are meant for short level emergency stabilization simply because that is the next highest level of emergency placement for youth with difficult behaviors.

Our stabilization programs are in no way equipped to be staffing youth with violent behaviors safely. These staff are not trained to work with these youth and it's in no way a secure facility. Recently, youth from my office that were placed there, "went on run from the program" and were out in the community freely without supervision. Youth who are involved with this system are at a statistically higher rate of becoming victims of trafficking, assaults, other crimes, etc if they were to go on the run. It's not safe. Having staff that have little to no training in working with youth that have violent behaviors, staffing these exact youth, is dangerous because it take a skillset to be able to manage these youth. When people aren't trained for this, it is not safe for staff or youth. .

Many youth that are involved in our system of care have experienced an unimaginable amount of trauma in their short lives. We see it everyday in the cases we work, sometimes passed down for generations. I have done enough training in chronic trauma and neglect to know that most youth/people who experience this amount of stress, live in a state of fight or flight constantly. Someone who is constantly feeling under stress like this, can ultimately lead to poor executive functioning and reasoning skills. Coping skills go out the window and people can resort to feeling the need to protect themselves, and at times this can look violent. Do I think youth with violent behaviors mean to be assaultive? Absolutely not. But do I think that youth who are in a perpetual state of acting in violent ways should be staffed in a non secure facility with inexperienced staff? Also no.

The unfortunate reality is that as long as we have youth who display violent or aggressive behaviors, we **NEED** a secure facility. When our only true secure facility for these youth was subtracted, nothing comparable to that level of care was added. The remaining system of care was expected to take on that weight, and it was unfortunately an unrealistic expectation. Because youth with violent behaviors **NEED** a higher level of care, they are being housed at some of our emergency stabilization programs. (which are not meant for this, especially when long term. No school, no therapy, etc) The youth who needed those stabilization placements are being shuffled in and out of foster homes, staffed in hospitals, or sometimes in police stations. I know a specific time when a youth had become assaultive towards hospital staff, was self harming, and needed chemical restraints to maintain safety for the youth and staff in the emergency room. This youth was kept in the hospital even after they were medically cleared because there was nowhere safe for them to go. We definitely put a large amount of stress on the relationship with this hospital, which I'm constantly worrying that the further strain we put on

these relationships (and this is my concern for our police partners as well). Despite the hospital pleading with us to find a safer place for them, we continued to keep them there as there was nowhere to go. What this situation pointed out for me is this:

As long as we don't have an appropriate and secure facility for our youth struggling with violent behaviors; whether it be the family services worker, a community partner, or the youth, **someone is going to get hurt.**

And people have been hurt. A recent event at one of our Vermont facilities supporting these high end youths, a staff member was severely assaulted by a youth (who would have been at Woodside) with a cast iron frying pan. This severely injured a staff member and placed this youth at further risk of picking up criminal charges. This youth is currently placed back in the community under DCF supervision due to the lack of a safe placement for her. I don't think I need to add more to this specific situation to show how this greatly impacted the staff safety, youth safety, and trickling into community safety. Almost exactly a year to the date, my colleague was sexually assaulted staffing a youth that was known to have sexually offending behaviors. He was being staffed by us, because there was not facility with the appropriate level of care immediately available, so FSD staff was asked to step in. I am one of the first people to volunteer to help out where I can, but to think that I could be called on to staff youth who are aggressive or violent concerns me. I am not trained for a situation where a youth might become physically aggressive with me and it is not something that is offered even in our basic foundations training.

I worry that if this information was not shared with you all, you would not see how urgent the need is for a secure facility to staff these youth. All I want, and I know my coworkers want, is to see these youth be successful. When youth are in custody, us workers spend a lot of time with them getting to know them and who these youth are as people. I always get asked by friends and family what keeps me going in this difficult work, and everytime I think about it, I think of the positive stories of seeing my clients be successful. I worry that the youth in these examples I shared are not being set up for success and that the system currently in place for them, is setting them up for failure.

Thank you.