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TO: Diane Lanpher Chair House Appropriations
FROM: Martin Lalonde, Chair, House Judiciary
RE: Judiciary's BA Request
DATE: 1/24/23

We write to let you know that the House Judiciary Committee strongly supports and advocates for the January 11, 2023 one-time BAA funding request that you received from the Office of the State Court Administrator, in order to expeditiously address issues of court backlog by ensuring reliable court operations as soon as possible.

Even before the COVID-19 epidemic started, the courts were experiencing a backlog. With the courts being greatly hampered by the lockdown due to COVID, the backlog became much worse. We have heard from all parties involved about how long it takes to get a court date and how difficult the backlog is on individuals, families, victims, attorneys involved, and the courts and their staff. New software was supposed to help lighten the backlog, and has made a significant difference; however, the backlog is now being negatively affected by long-standing internet connectivity issues experienced by the courts, which have not been adequately addressed and have significantly worsened over the past 18 months.

Our committee was very concerned to hear about the very difficult troubles that the Judiciary has been having with court operations, due to routine and unresolved technology slowdowns, and more recently the thirteen separate major network outages that resulted in shutting down every courthouse in Vermont. These outages result in canceled court dates that people have waited months or even years to schedule and attend.

The situation is unacceptable and has made access to justice unreliable. In addition, the court backlog has impacted public safety as courts are not holding individuals accountable for illegal behavior in a timely manner.

We leave it to the appropriate committee(s) to determine which route Judiciary takes to alleviate the issue, but know the appropriation is dire in order to make that happen.

We understand the request is for Vermont IT replacement \$4.680,000; Internal Cabling \$750,000; Sound System replacement \$500,000 and Correctional Remote Hearing improvement funding of \$300,000.

We support all of these improvements - particularly for the IT replacement so the courts are no longer dependent on ADS - and believe it is best for Vermonters to address this immediately. Waiting for a future budget appropriation will prohibit the courts from making meaningful progress on addressing the unacceptable backlog.

Regarding the request for equipment for remote hearings in Corrections buildings, we wonder if it might be more appropriate for the DOC budget to fund DOC improvements (in part or in whole, especially if those spaces are used for DOC hearings, etc); however we want to ensure people held in corrections have adequate access to attending hearings and other matters before the courts.

If there are ARPA funds or other federal relief funds available for BAA requests, we believe the proposed use of one-time funds by the Office of the State Court Administrator may meet the criteria for using such funds.

We are available to provide additional information. Thank you for your consideration of this request.