

Memorandum

To: Representative Lanpher and Representative Bluemle, House Appropriations Committee
Representatives Wood and Whitman, House Human Services Committee
From: The Vermont AIDS Services Organizations (ASOs) - VT CARES, AIDS Project of
Southern Vermont, and HIV/HCV Resource Center
Date: January 6, 2024
Re: Act 22 – FY 24 Budget Adjustment and Opioid Settlement Funds (Act 22)

For decades, the Legislature has appropriated funds for HIV/AIDS services to the AIDS Services Organizations (ASOs) in Sec. E.312. At first, the funding was limited to AIDS services and medication - the primary focus of our work. \$100,000 was then added for prevention, which included syringe exchange. Then the Legislature added an appropriation for Syringe Exchange Programs (SSPs), which is currently \$300,000 divided amongst 4 programs.

FY 2024 Budget Adjustment Request

Funds for AIDS Services

The funds we receive for AIDS Services are sufficient at this time; however, we are asking that it be confirmed by legislature that funds are flexible in the use of the \$295,000.

Funds for SSPs

Sec. E.312 appropriates \$300,000 to be divided per an agreed upon formula to the three ASOs and to Safe Recovery. We are requesting that the shared funding of \$300,000 be increased to \$800,000. We are also requesting a technical correction to the language, as the funds go to the four SSPs. The need for SSP services has exponentially grown and our current budgets do not support the need. This additional funding will allow us to sufficiently staff the programs, increase access in rural communities, partner with other community-based organizations, provide education and technical assistance, and purchase harm reduction supplies. We are having a hard time hiring and retaining staff - the pay is too low. Existing staff often do the work of two staff members causing chronic burnout and turnover, as well as not bringing in qualified, culturally sensitive staff. We also cannot open new sites or afford the supplies and their widespread distribution. The work that we do is essential to the health and wellness of those we serve, and we want to build on our partnerships with public safety. If the state wants us to continue to do this work, then it has to be funded sufficiently.

We request the following amendments to the FY 2024 budget:

Sec. E.312 HEALTH – PUBLIC HEALTH

(a) HIV/AIDS funding:

(2) In fiscal year 2024, the Department of Health shall provide grants in the amount of \$295,000 to the following organizations for HIV and harm reduction services:

(5) In fiscal year 2024, the Department of Health shall provide grants in the amount of ~~\$300,000~~ \$800,000 in General Funds to the four current Vermont Syringe Services Programs ~~AIDS service organizations and other Vermont HIV/AIDS prevention providers for syringe exchange programs...~~

Act 22 – Opioid Settlement Funds

Sec. 14 of Act 22 states the following:

In fiscal year 2023, the following monies shall be appropriated from the Opioid Abatement Special Fund pursuant to 18 V.S.A. § 4774:

(4) \$400,000.00 divided equally among the State's four syringe service providers to provide overdose prevention services and response education and resources that build trust between individuals with substance use disorder and Vermont's system of care;

18 V.S.A. § 4774 (Opioid Abatement Special Funds) states

(a)(1) ... the supplemental opioid abatement fund, or any other settlement funds that must be utilized exclusively for opioid prevention, intervention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction services.

(3) Disbursements from the Opioid Abatement Special Fund ***shall supplement and not supplant or replace*** any existing or future local, State, or federal government funding for infrastructure, programs, supports, and resources, including health insurance benefits, federal grant funding, and Medicaid and Medicare funds.

We are now 7 months into the fiscal year and we have not received any of these funds. The Vermont Department of Health's position is that we are not to receive these funds until after the Overdose Outreach Worker Grants, currently funded through COVID Block Grant Funding, have run out, which will be 2/1/24. Because these funds are to be used to supplement any existing state or federal funds, there was no reason to delay the allocation of the appropriated funds. By waiting until the federal grant runs out, this essentially level funds the SSPs - substituting Settlement Funds for the Block Grant and not infusing new money into the SSPs. We also learned that this is one-time funding and SSPs will not receive additional Opioid Abatement Special Funds unless the language that is in Act 22 is amended this year or in the future.

Syringe Service Programs have been chronically underfunded for as long as they have been in existence. There are millions of dollars available in the Opioid Abatement Special Fund. ASOs have been serving people who use drugs for decades. The fact that the existing SSP's did not receive priority funding from the Opioid Settlement funds to expand existing services is a clear message to us and to Vermonters that the Health Department and the Opioid Settlement Committee do not value or support this life saving work enough to truly put the funds where they are most needed - and could have been immediately implemented. Quite frankly, the chronic underfunding of SSP's is the paramount reason why we are not better able to address the needs of people with substance use disorder over the many, many years that lead up to the current crisis we face. This was, and still is, an opportunity to do the right thing and grant SSP's the resources we need to finally bring the services we have been offering for decades to more locations with more staff and expanded offerings.

We are requesting that the \$400,000 be immediately added to our existing grants so that we can effectively use them to provide the assistance that Vermonters need. In the future, we request your support in continuing to use the Settlement Funds every year to support SSPs.