

My name is Kelly Deforge and I am the president of the Board of Trustees for Howard Center, chair of Howard Center's Family Advisory Council, and co-chair of the agency's Development and Communications Committee. I am also a family member of a Howard Center client.

I am grateful for this opportunity to thank the Legislature and our state government for the partnership that enables Howard Center and other agencies across Vermont to provide the care that has been so important to my family and to so many other families in our state. The rate increases and one-time funds provided over the last two years have been especially important in reducing staff turnover and preserving vital services in our DA/SSA system, services that can mean everything to a family or individual in need.

Vermonters are struggling with high rates of suicide, growing numbers of overdoses, and serious mental health needs, and they need our help. The number of people with developmental disabilities served by VCP agencies who do not have permanent homes grew last year, rates of suicide among older Vermonters are consistently higher than the national average, and our children are struggling with depression and anxiety.

Howard Center and the other DAs and SSAs across the state are struggling to help and are doing so with staffing diminished by inadequate pay, high administrative burdens, and burnout. Vacancy rates across the DA/SSA system are not as bad as they were last year, but they are still unacceptably high. The staff who remain are tremendously dedicated but also exhausted. They love their jobs but many are leaving in search of higher pay, greater flexibility, and less stressful work.

Over the last two decades the gap between inflation and funding increases to DA/SSAs grew by 14%, a gap that I hope will be closed in the near future. However, knowing that the state has many other considerations and limited resources, I fully support and urge the Legislature to provide a Medicaid rate increase of 6.5% (\$14,616,695 in General Fund) and an additional \$453,000 in Eldercare Program funding. With needs continuing to increase, this is the minimum required for agencies like Howard Center to maintain vital support to Vermonters.

Without a healthy DA/SSA system, Vermonters in need will turn to much more costly interventions like crisis services, law enforcement, schools, and emergency departments. Investment in the community-based services provided by DAs and SSAs will control costs in other areas, prevent people in need from reaching a point where they require crisis interventions, and benefit all Vermonters.

Thank you,



Kelly Deforge
Howard Center Board of Trustees, President