

Dear Madam Chair Houghton, Vice Chair McFaun, and House Health Care Committee Members,

I appreciate the opportunity to provide comment on the Governor's Proposed FY2023 Budget Adjustment to expedite the funding for a Youth In-Patient Facility, combining my professional and personal roles. I have been working in VT Elementary Schools for the past 28 years, the last 11 as a principal. I am a parent of a child who required mental health support and services, and was tethered to a bed in an ER for 11 days. In addition, my current professional role is the Executive Director for the Center of Health and Learning, having left the school system in June of 2022. CHL provides suicide prevention training, awareness, and education across the entire state, with also supporting those with substance misuse by training the providers who give direct services to those populations. Mental Health and wellness are at the center of all we do in our preventative work, as we are not only an agency of response, but one of upstreaming thinking and prevention.

First of all as both a consumer, and a provider of these services, I am delighted to know that there is the Governor's support for a 12 bed inpatient youth wing being developed. This is a much needed addition to the lack of available and accessible mental health support for our teens (ages 12-17, as I understand it). As this project becomes more finalized I would like to share our recommendations for considerations:

1. As an Elem Principal I can testify that there are many many children under the age of 12 in acute crisis daily. The pandemic has left us with many children who have lived and experienced traumas for an extended period of time, that require significant support just to maintain basic safety to self and others. Just last year I had 2 students, both age 5, who used suicidal language and their bodies to communicate their levels of need to the trusted adults at school. This is a shift in the past ten years...with a younger population having complex and co-existing needs.

In addition, please be aware that the developmental ages of the children matter in location and service. When my son was in the ER for 11 days, we were housed directly next to adults in mental health crisis, who loudly shared their needs, thoughts, and actions...that my son observed and heard, which was more triggering, as it caused him to feel unsafe in what should've been a safe space with supports. If you choose to designate some of the beds to the younger population, please be aware of where they will be located in relation to the teens and adults. Lastly, we know through research and countless studies, that early intervention is the best. If we can support, educate, and regulate the youngest children, we may not need to serve them as teens and adults.

2. The location of the proposed facility being in the southern part of the state, leaves two thirds of the state in their current predicament of lack of access due to travel, time, and transportation needs.

Since Brattleboro Retreat is already located in this same area, locating the new beds in central or northern VT would likely increase access and eliminate some of the barriers now in place for families trying to engage with the services needed. Our hope is that the location will be carefully considered so that it serves the most youth possible.

3. Please use families with lived experience in your planning and vetting of the important details of this project. They are the ones, as the consumer of the services who most clearly share what has worked and what is needed. The distinction between families of children with complex needs, and those of the professionals planning for services is the life long, twenty four nature of their family stressors and needs. There is no way to turn off my son's neuro diversities...they are with us always. Please ask families about their journey's and then listen carefully to their responses. I for one am happy to provide further information for anyone who wants to make systems improvements.

4. I had the Youth Director of a DA in VT literally say to me in the hospital crisis, "IF you sign custody over to DCF, you would get a placement more quickly for your son". What an awful thing to say to a loving family who is using every resource they can find to support, nurture, and care for their child. I, of course, did NOT heed that recommendation...but that should not have been the reality of my choices as a parent. Please remember that while children in custody need and deserve help, so do those that are still living with their families. Services need to be available to both populations.

Lastly, as I am hopeful to hear about this proposal for the additional beds at SVM, our needs in VT are great. They are here, they are now. We can, and need to do better by our children!

Thank you for your time and consideration on this important matter.

Kathleen Kilbourne