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Testimony for House Committee for Healthcare

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Director, Access and Intake

Howard Center

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today and to take into consideration funding our Cultural Liaison program through the end of our fiscal year. I am the Director of Intake at Howard Center, the largest designated agency in the state serving over 19,000 clients annually with 1,600 staff.

At Howard Center I am responsible for the team that helps new clients identify and register with the Howard Center programs they need, essentially the “front door” of our organization, and that includes one of our newest programs serving immigrant, refugee, and asylee community members, our Cultural Liaison Program. (Going forward I will refer to those served by our Cultural Liaison Program as our resettled community.)

The Origin of the Program

During COVID lockdown in 2020, there was a large COVID outbreak in the Bhutanese Nepali population in Winooski. It was determined the community was not aware of how to mitigate the spread because there was no connection to the greater community supporting and informing them. A group of concerned human service and community members met and out of those meetings funding for services was established for our resettled population.

Funding

DMH received a grant from the CDC (Health Equity Grant) through the Department of Health in 2021 for two-year funding of \$267,000 to create a 3-person team to work with our resettled community members to decrease disparities. In the spring of 2023, an additional \$80k was added through the same grant. This funding was not renewed. Howard Center is requesting \$166,000 in FY2024 budget adjustment to continue the Cultural Liaison program through the end of the fiscal year.

Cultural Liaison Program

With funding received thus far, we created a robust Cultural Liaison program with three individuals from different resettled communities. The main purpose of our program is engaging, building trust, and being ambassadors for Howard Center services. Our Cultural Liaisons are not from every resettled community we serve, but they have the same lived experience which is vital to engagement. We strive to demystify and destigmatize our services and bring our resettled community members into services, so they do not end up in crisis. Our small team is increasing



community partnerships and in a short time has engaged over 100 resettled families. Our cultural liaisons are not language interpreters but are interpreters of Howard Center services.



Cultural Liaison program staff

Demystify and Destigmatize

We hear from many in our resettled community the language that only “crazy” people go to Howard Center and that they do not want to be seen in that way in their country’s community. Some of our resettled community members believe that if someone is “crazy” that is God’s way. Our team seeks to inform about Howard services as another way to help. Our Cultural Liaison’s work with individuals and leaders in the community and provide information and resources about all our services at Howard. We have found meeting with community leaders is a vital way to build trust that allows us to work individually with resettled families.

Our Cultural Liaison program has met with individual resettled country leaders, established organizations like AALV, USCRI, Islamic Society of Vermont, Connecting Cultures, VT Afghan Alliance, and many schools. Howard Center has also translated many of our brochures into different languages and works with ease with many different interpretation services.

Our biggest focus is on mental health and suicide prevention. Our team is trained in identifying and referring folks who have suicidal ideation, and we work closely with our crisis team, First Call for Chittenden County. Our Cultural Liaison Supervisor was eager to be trained as a Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) trainer. MHFA is 8-hour skills-based training course that teaches participants about mental health and substance-use issues. She has held trainings for the Bhutanese Nepali, Congolese, and Burundi communities, the Islamic Society of Vermont and The Family Room to further spreading information about how to identify mental health issues and support, and where to get help. Our goal is to identify and get treatment before our resettled community is in crisis.



Who We Serve

In the past two years we have served nearly 100 resettled families providing over 1200 services across all ages. These resettled families are from 13 different countries with 10 different languages. Nepali, Swahili, and Somali are the languages we are currently working with the most. Samples of our services are:

- An older Bhutanese Nepali client was identified through our Street Outreach program as being disconnected and isolated from services and family and living in a motel outside of Burlington. This client was far from family, did not know how to use the bus, was without food regularly, and had major medical issues. Our team connected with this client and helped her with transportation, finding ethnically appropriate food, and working together she was able to secure Section 8 project-based housing, and now regularly takes the bus to medical appointments.
- An adolescent of a resettled family attempted to hang himself while at a school function. Howard Center school social workers engaged with our team to meet with the family. The parents did not understand what their child did nor the severity of his feelings leading to the attempt. Our team was able to immediately gain trust because of their shared country of origin and work with the parents to provide services to their child. The child is now engaged in therapy and attending school.
- Our program not only helps individual resettled families, but we bring awareness to Howard Center staff about issues with acculturation, isolation with our resettled community and a better understanding in how to serve them. Our team has been vital to Howard Center and has consulted with many programs and staff to improve understanding of different cultures, in-turn leading to better outcomes.
- We continue to reach out to many communities and this month we are hosting a meet and greet at 3 different housing authority units in Winooski and Burlington to raise awareness about HC services with resettled families.

Thank you for your support and consideration in funding our program with \$166,000 for this fiscal year and helping our resettled community to lead healthy lives in Chittenden County.