

Good afternoon. My name is Julie Cunningham and I am the Executive Director of Families First in Southern Vermont, a specialized service agency that serves children, youth and adults with disabilities.

Thank you for taking this important testimony on how we can better strive towards keeping vulnerable adults safe from abuse, neglect and exploitation.

I've listened to the professionals who have drilled down into updating the reporting guidelines and I'm appreciative of the time and dedication this took them. I'm going to take a broader view of the policy because my colleagues and I were not part of these workgroups.

As you may know, most of the designated and specialized service agencies that serve people with disabilities and elders through Choices for Care belong to Vermont Care Partners, our trade association. The DS Directors meet monthly to discuss regulation changes (such as payment reform and conflict of interest free case management), and best practices in our field. We receive information from National groups like ANCOR and NASDP (National Association of Direct Support Providers) We work closely with DAIL and Director Jennifer Garabedian and Deputy Director Jessica Bernard who join us for a part of each meeting.

The high profile abuse and neglect cases that have been in the paper the last few months have of course been a focus of our group. We understand that it is our responsibility to defend and protect vulnerable adults from bad and dangerous actors by having policies and procedures in place and having ongoing education and training for staff in all levels of our organization. And while we can never lose focus on this fundamental aspect of our mission, the aftereffects of the pandemic and the resulting workforce shortages have left the entire system exposed.

In FY 22, over 33% of staff at VCP network agencies have left their jobs. Vacancy rates are over 20% for mental health and 24% for developmental services. Some DS programs have vacancy rates as high as 50 to 60 %. State-wide we have 100 people with developmental disabilities who are waiting for residential supports. Since 2006, Medicaid rates for network agencies have lagged 15% behind inflation. Last year's 8 % increase was much needed and appreciated but staff are still leaving for jobs with less responsibility and equal or more money.