

2/14/2023

Good morning committee members. Thank you for taking the time to hear from us today. My name is Trissie Casanova and I have worked for DCF FSD for the last 20 years. 13 of those years I spent working out of the St. Albans District office in a variety of roles (investigations/assessments, Juvenile Services, Child Protection). Over the last 6.5 years I have been working out of Central Office as the Deputy Compact Administrator for our Interstate Programs and I am the Human Trafficking Consultant for the division. Currently, I am the chair of the LMC and have been since a 2014/2015.

Today we are here to talk with you about DCF's High End System of Care that is in a State of Emergency and is in desperate need of response. It has been over two years since the closure of Woodside and three years since the beginning of COVID. Both events have had an immense impact on our system of care. In that time the need for mental health beds, crisis and stabilization beds, residential beds and detention beds has continued to grow and the capacity in programs has only gone down. As you are likely aware, the media continues to highlight the growing number of incidences of gun violence within our communities, which we have seen impact our work with families and the safety of our staff working in the field.

In order to meet the needs of Vermont's most vulnerable children, all parts of our system of care need to be functioning. We need facilities with staff that can meet the needs of children who have a history of trauma, of violence towards themselves or others, unmet mental health needs, substance abuse, and those whose needs exceed the foster care system. When children in DCF custody whose needs can no longer be met in the community and there are no available staff secure placements, DCF FSD employees have then been charged with staffing these children at a variety of locations. Sometimes with LE presence, sometimes with only FSD staff. In the last two years, the HESOC (High End System of Care) has fallen on the backs of FSD employees who are putting themselves at risk of harm in order to meet this need. The majority of the staff who are providing this service are part of a high-end system of care staffing team; a team which I am part of. However, when these staff are unable to cover the duration of the staffing's, the request for "volunteers" goes out to all FSD and then if there is still a need then the on-call worker gets called out to provide the staffing. These staffing's are occurring on average of one staffing per week. This is on top of their normal job responsibilities. Many of these staffing's are for over a 24 hour period of time and staff have to remain awake overnight after working the prior shift. The staffing's also include long travel times since some of our locations are a 3 hour commute for our staff.

In the last year, there have been times where FSD has had to staff multiple children at separate locations in the same night. FSD is being expected to create pop up residential programs with their staff; despite not having the training to be residential staff. This increased workload has increased staff burnout and exhausted staffing resources.

In the last two years Vermont has lost half of their available high-end beds, despite DCF increasing funding to these programs. This only resulted in programs being able to stay open, vs. resuming their pre covid capacity levels or increasing capacity. This has increased the need for FSD staffing of these children at Emergency Departments, police stations, hospitals, Yellow House, Horizons, Rest Stop, Mountainside, district offices, correctional facilities, etc. In June 2020, the VT Digger reported that 4 juveniles had been held in adult jails because there was no juvenile facility to place them in Vermont.

Kids should not have to be placed in an adult correctional facility because there is no other secure safe juvenile alternative.

In the last year there have been 63 instances where FSD staff were called in to staff kids. Some of these youth, FSD staff should not have been providing staffing as it compromised their personal safety based on the level of aggression those youth were demonstrating. Just because a child is in DCF custody does not mean that FSD staff should be expected to staff them when they present a danger to others. Not only is this dangerous for our staff, it is also dangerous and a set up for these kids. Just two weeks ago, I was asked if I would be willing to staff a youth and was warned of the likelihood that this youth might try to assault me. Despite the clear recommendation from our Staff Safety Manger that we should not be staffing this child due to the risk they posed to our staff, staffing was still requested because we had no other options in our current system of care.

While we have exceptionally skilled staff at FSD, we are child protection and juvenile justice workers; we are not residential or detention staff. When FSD employees are tasked with staffing these children, we are responsible for feeding them, providing them with the meds, making sure they are safe, making sure they don't have access to anything that could hurt them or us, and do our best to have maintaining safety the only expectation held. Since we are not residential staff, our staff are not assessing situations from that lens; and with multiple staff changing over those expectations can change making it more difficult for children to maintain.

All these continued pressures on our system are having a direct impact on the safety and well-being of our staff. The continued need to provide high end staffing's will only continue to add to worker burnout which we know leads to heavy staff turnover. We know that our staff is our greatest resource, and their ability to engage families is one of the most important things. We also know when there is high turnover, there is an inability to form those crucial relationships with the families we serve which has a direct impact on worker safety. Anecdotally, I can say that it feels like we can't keep our staff and that we are a revolving door and people are not applying to come work for us. Which makes me sad because, as one of my good friend at FSD says, this really is the best job! Under normal circumstances we have great opportunity to help families. Under the current circumstances we are not able to help the most vulnerable Vermont families who desperately need help.

This continued systemic failure is not a problem that FSD can solve on our own. We have been trying to do that for the last 3 years and despite everyone's best efforts we cannot do it alone. We are in a State of Emergency and need intervention outside of FSD in order to create a solution NOW. We cannot continue to wait in this crisis. Last month, the VSEA sent a letter to Gov. Scott requesting that he meet with FSD staff due to their consistent exposure to hazardous work conditions as a result of the lack of appropriate placements in the State of Vermont. We encourage this committee to request to speak with more FSD line staff so you can hear from them about their experiences as you have the power to help create solutions now.

The reality is that this current plan, of FSD employees staffing all these children every week for the foreseeable future is not sustainable for the kids and for our staff. While I know that everyone is saying that something bad is going to happen if something does not change quickly, I would like to remind everyone that bad things have already happened. We have had a FSD employee sexually assaulted while providing staffing to a high- end youth. This is unacceptable. If we cannot get a facility with staff that can meet the needs of this population, tragedy will strike again with either our staff, a child or

community member. We need action right now from our highest leaders in Vermont, because without them we will not be able to resolve this problem.