

Urgent Need - Funding for Syringe Service Programs - Opioid Settlement Fund

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Thank you for your support for the additional \$500,000 for the Syringe Exchange Programs (SSPs) in FY 2024 that you included in the Budget Adjustment Bill. We continue to work with the Senate to support this appropriation.

In FY 2025, the SSPs, including Vermont CARES, will continue to face a critical funding situation. As the Executive Director of Vermont CARES, I can personally testify to the urgent need for sufficient financial support to address the challenges posed by the opioid and overdose crisis facing the people we serve. SSPs have been chronically underfunded, and despite our best efforts to provide life-saving services on tight budgets and understaffed conditions, the situation has reached a breaking point.

Last session, during my testimony on the FY 2024 budget, I refrained from requesting additional state general funds for specific programs, believing that the Opioid Settlement Funds would come through to address our funding needs. Unfortunately, we are still awaiting the promised 400,000 allocation from FY 2024, and this year's Settlement Fund recommendations have omitted Syringe Service Programs entirely.

The Opioid Settlement Funds are vital for our organizations, as they directly serve individuals grappling with opioid use disorder, often stemming from the actions of Big Pharma. The allocated amount of \$100,000 for each of the four SSPs last year was insufficient, and the absence of funding for this year is alarming, especially given the ongoing overdose crisis. I question the feasibility of expanding much needed services and implementing new programs when existing services are not adequately funded. We are in a state of emergency, and the lack of funding is jeopardizing lives. At Vermont CARES we continue to grapple with staffing issues. This is something we have talked about in previous years as well. Our staff members are facing immense challenges, including overwork, and burnout due to understaffing which hampers our ability to meet the growing needs of the communities we serve. We estimate that we will need to almost double our staffing budget this year over last year and increase supplies expenses (program budget of \$500,000 to \$900,000). In addition, to help you get a snapshot into the scope of the services of the SSPs, Vermont CARES work across all sites since FY 2023 included:

- 1,058,232 syringes distributed
- 7043 doses of Narcan distributed and 285 overdose reversals reported (likely much higher, many go unreported)
- Over 10,000 different kinds of safer smoking kits were distributed
- 716 new people enrolled in services at the SSP's- We have four offices & two mobile units
- 6076 visits took place across all sites

- 987 Referrals were made to treatment, recovery, health or human services.
- 545 of those referrals were accepted by the participants.
- Mobile services were provided in 52 different towns across 11 counties
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We offer the following proposed amendments to Sec. E.312 to address the SSP funding needs:

Funding: We are requesting an additional \$700,000 for SSPs to meet the growing demand.

Language: The language changes are a reflection of current practice.

Sec. E.312 HEALTH – PUBLIC HEALTH

(a) AIDS/HIV funding:

(1) In fiscal year 2025 and as provided in this section, the Department of Health shall provide grants in the amount of \$475,000 in AIDS Medication Rebates special funds to the Vermont AIDS service and peer-support organizations for client-based support services. The Department of Health AIDS Program shall meet at least quarterly with the Community Advisory Group (CAG) with current information and data relating to service initiatives. The funds shall be allocated according to an RFP process.

(2) In fiscal year 2025 and as provided in this section, the Department of Health shall provide grants in the amount of \$295,000 for HIV and harm reduction services to the following organizations:

(A) Vermont CARES - \$140,000;

(B) AIDS Project of Southern Vermont - \$100,000; and

(C) HIV/HCV Resource Center - \$55,000.

(3) Ryan White Title II funds for AIDS services and the Vermont Medication Assistance Program (VMAP) shall be distributed in accordance with federal guidelines. The federal guidelines shall not apply to programs or services funded solely by State general funds.

(A) The Secretary of Human Services shall immediately notify the Joint Fiscal Committee if at any time there are insufficient funds in VMAP to assist all eligible individuals. The Secretary shall work in collaboration with persons living with HIV/AIDS to develop a plan to continue access to VMAP medications until such time as the General Assembly can take action.

(B) As provided in this section, the Secretary of Human Services shall work in collaboration with the VMAP Advisory Committee, which shall be composed of not less than 50 percent of members who are living with HIV/AIDS. If a modification to the program's eligibility requirements or benefit coverage is considered, the Committee shall make recommendations regarding the program's formulary of approved medication, related laboratory testing, nutritional supplements, and eligibility for the program.

(4) In fiscal year 2025, the Department of Health shall provide grants in the amount of \$100,000 in general funds to the four current Vermont Syringe Services Programs

Vermont AIDS service organizations and other Vermont HIV/AIDS prevention providers for community-based HIV prevention programs and services. These funds shall be used for HIV/AIDS prevention purposes, including syringe exchange programs; improving the availability of confidential and anonymous HIV testing; prevention work with at-risk groups such as women, intravenous drug users, and people of color; and anti-stigma campaigns. Not more than 15 percent of the funds may be used for the administration of such services by the recipients of these funds. The method by which these prevention funds are distributed shall be determined by mutual agreement of the Department of Health and the Vermont AIDS service organizations and other Vermont HIV/AIDS prevention providers.

(5) In fiscal year 2025, the Department of Health shall provide grants in the amount of \$300,000 ~~\$600,000~~ in general funds to the four current Vermont Syringe Services Programs Vermont AIDS service organizations and other Vermont HIV/AIDS prevention providers for syringe exchange programs. The method by which these prevention funds are distributed shall be determined by mutual agreement of the Department of Health and the four current Vermont Syringe Services Programs, the Vermont AIDS service organizations, and other Vermont HIV/AIDS prevention providers. The performance period for these grants will be State fiscal year 2025. Grant reporting shall include outcomes and results.

(6) In fiscal year 2025, the Department of Health shall provide grants in the amount of \$400,000 in Opioid Abatement Special Funds to the four current Vermont Syringe Services Programs, to be divided equally, for syringe exchange programs. This amount shall be base funding until the Opioid Abatement Special Fund has expired.

(7) In fiscal year 2025, the Department of Health shall not reduce any grants to the Vermont AIDS service and peer-support organizations or syringe service programs from funds appropriated for AIDS/HIV services to levels below those in fiscal year 2024 without receiving prior approval from the Joint Fiscal Committee.