



Vermont State Employees' Association

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Testimony before the Joint Legislative Justice Oversight Committee, Thursday, October 26, 2023

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee.

My name is Steve Howard, I am the executive director of the Vermont State Employees' Union, the VSEA. I am here with Trissie Casanova who is the Chair of the VSEA Labor-Management Committee. Trissie has more than 20 years of experience in DCF and has held many positions during that period.

Our members in DCF Family Services are dedicated and committed to the successful care and supervision of Vermont's children who come into custody from a variety of paths with complicated and often traumatic histories, our members show up day in and day out at all hours of the day and night, weekdays, and weekends to do what is right by these children. We are failing. We, the people of Vermont, are failing. We do not have the resources we need to help these children at moments in their lives when they need us the most, we are not keeping the Family Services team that support them safe nor are we providing them with the resources they need. We all need to do better. This is a community problem; Family Services is left holding the bag when everyone else taps out. They cannot do this alone; we need to invest in community partnerships.

Members of the VSEA are grateful for the efforts of Governor Scott and Commissioner Winters and members of the General Assembly for genuinely trying to address the lack of beds for youth in the Family Services system. We are prepared to work together, collaboratively to find solutions to the tsunami facing our state due to the lack of appropriate settings in which to provide safe and meaningful help to our most traumatized children. WE ARE NOT SAFELY SERVING OR TREATING THESE CHILDREN, WE ARE FAILING TO MAKE THE NECESSARY INVESTMENTS IN THEM

The number of staffings by our members has DOUBLED in just one year, while the number of safe settings in which to treat and care for them has been slashed by half. This reduction in available beds is a result of a lack of staffing, because of safety concerns and because of disinvestment in state resources. We have lost the number of appropriate settings we need to meet this need.

We are desperate, DESPERATE. Good people, experienced and competent in DCF Family Services are making decisions they know shouldn't make, and would never make except they have no other options, Desperation has set in. In the past few months, our members have reported to their union multiple incidents of near misses, where bad decisions, poor communication and a system that is overwhelmed, narrowly missed a catastrophic outcome. —Bad things have already happened; I don't have to remind this committee that we have already had one Family Service Supervisor murdered and another Family Service Worker Sexually Assaulted. By pure luck, we have avoided other bad results; our members fear that one day, maybe soon, our luck will run out.



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Our members describe the current situation we as a state are facing as "A BALL OF FIRE IN THE MIDST OF A STATE OF EMERGENCY. -

Let me just be clear, the Administration has worked hard to put infrastructure in place, we are 4 years into this situation, many of the promised alternatives have not come to fruition, for reasons often beyond their control. This has become an invisible problem, the problem has not disappeared, kids in the high-end system of care are essentially homeless because we don't have appropriate facilities to meet their needs, which include, complex trauma, histories of aggression, sexual assault psychiatric issues and kids with harmful behaviors. While we appreciate the proposals outlined in the report we are here to discuss today, our members are skeptical. Skeptical because so many elements of these proposals have been on the table for so long and so many previous efforts toward a solution have failed to materialize. We are concerned that there is no PLAN B, leaving our members to wonder what happens then?

Our members are exhausted, demoralized and they are giving up- we cannot sustain what is currently occurring much longer, the anguish, the pain, the exhaustion, and the trauma are plainly evident when you speak with them. TRAUMATIZED Because the system is IMPLODING.

Community partners are angry, and they are frustrated, and they are giving up on DCF and the State of Vermont- from law enforcement to hospitals, once reliable partners have had it and real damage to these relationships with has set in- they are tired, and they want the State of Vermont to get its act together.

The lack of available beds for youth is a risk to the youth and to our communities, it is spilling out on the evening news every day- more stories of violent encounters of young Vermonters all because we are forced to return youth to the community before they have had the ability to get the help they need, puts them and your constituents in jeopardy. This is a public safety crisis.

Let me be clear: We cannot wait 6 years, 6 months, 6 weeks, 6 hours, or 6 minutes for a solution or even some relief. WE NEED ACTION NOW:

- The members of the VSEA are calling on the Governor to declare an immediate STATE OF EMERGENCY FOR DCF FAMILY SERVICES, and to do it TODAY. cutting red tape and moving the total force and all available resources of state government to bring to fruition immediate beds OF ANY TYPE immediately- This is not unprecedented, in fact, just over the border from where Senator Sears is sitting now in Bennington, Governor Healy in Massachusetts has declared a state of emergency and has deployed the National Guard to help with housing migrants in her state.
- We urge the Governor to immediately deploy the National Guard to construct more beds and to provide security for our Family Services members in situations where the threat of violence is great. Our members in family services are being asked to perform work as Residential



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Counselors for which they have some applicable skills, but for which they have not been trained to safely monitor kids who may pose a threat of violence or are a risk to themselves.

- We call on the Scott Administration to Convert already available state-owned properties in Central VT and Chittenden County to temporary beds. In just a few days, we will lose Yellow House in Lamoille County when it reopens as a warming shelter for the winter, leaving no safe environments in the northern part of the state and to it immediately.
- We call on the Governor and the Legislature to open a temporary 4 bed facility in Middlesex by Thanksgiving- NOT JANUARY AND NOT MARCH. and to put in place leadership and independent oversight of that facility that will guarantee we are safely stabilizing youth in this facility.
- We call on the Governor, this Committee, and members of the General Assembly to take time out of their schedules to spend a shift at central intake or go out with family service workers to do a staffing to see upfront and closely what we are asking these state employees to do and how our lack of resources impacts the children in their custody.
- We ask this committee, before you leave today, to write to the Governor and support our calls for these actions and demand that they report to you and the public weekly on their progress.
- Vermont needs to come together like we are facing a flood, a pandemic, a statewide emergency. These kids are our kids, and they need us to help them RIGHT NOW.
- VSEA members go to bed every night, knowing the current level of danger we are exposing our members in Family Services to, both physically and mentally. They know that it is only a matter of time before our luck has run out and yet another member of our DCF family is attacked, or even worse, killed in their service to the children they care so much about.
- These kids deserve our help, our members are safer when we have adequately invested in the system of care they need and deserve, Let's invest in these kids and keep VSEA members safe and secure in the process.