

Hello,

my name is Alena Ross Becker and I live in Burlington, Vermont. I am a Service Coordinator and Assistant Team Leader with the Early Intervention program at Northwestern Counseling & Support Services (NCSS) serving all of Chittenden County. The Early Intervention program supports some of our communities most vulnerable children (and their families) who are impacted by a diagnosis like Autism Spectrum Disorder, Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy and more. We also support children (and their families) who have general developmental delays, providing specialty supports to get children caught up and ready for school. I am writing to you all today in support of a Medicaid rate increase of 6.5% (\$14.6 million) for the designated and specialized service agencies providing essential state services to Vermonter.

Firstly, I would like to thank the legislature for their ongoing support of the DA and SSA system. The funding increases we have received in FY23 and FY24 have begun to help with vacancy and retention rates in our program. This has helped us to continue to provide supports for children and families in Chittenden County, Vermont. Vacancies in our system of care have a ripple effect on the families that we support, our communities, the school system, and the overall health of Vermont. It is clear that the legislature recognizes and is supportive of those who do this important and valuable work in the largest county in Vermont.

In my role at the agency, I am constantly reminded of the reasons for why we continue to need added support. Inconsistent staffing due to a lack of funding has been a huge issue in our program. In the time that the program has been with NCSS (a little over 3 years), we have never been fully staffed; we've had about 19 staff leave. Over the past 3 years, we have only been able to staff 13 out of our 19 spots. The majority of the staff who have resigned left because they were unable to support themselves or their families on their current income. This is also true for staff who had multiple jobs. We live in the largest county in VT with the highest cost of living and our staff are unable to get their own basic needs met while doing a very important job, supporting the most vulnerable children and families of Chittenden County.

As an assistant team leader, I am a part of the hiring process for the program. We have found some wonderful candidates who would be a great fit for our program. Unfortunately, the reason why most of the candidates turn down the position is because of the salary that is offered. We tend to lose candidates to other places like the special education programs at the school district level or to childcares. These programs can pay higher salaries. Currently, our program is struggling with being able to offer competitive wages, which is affecting our ability to provide quality care.

When hiring and staffing are an issue, the people who we are supporting are the most affected. Families are unable to have steady supports when current staff leave. Children's developmental progress gets interrupted, meaning they make less progress than we would like them to. And we are providing services at a lower frequency than what we would recommend because we don't have enough staff to provide what is needed. Because we have a lack in staffing, by the time children turn 3 and start to get supported by the school district, they are farther behind than they could be. This is taking a toll on our school systems and their budgets since less kids are getting caught up before entering the school system, meaning more kids need services by the time they reach school age.

To support Vermonters, children, families, and the school systems, the state should continue its investment in the DA/SSA system. A Medicaid rate increase of 6.5% (\$14.6 million) will support our ability to hire and retain staff so we can give families and children the supports that they deserve and need. Thank you for your time and your thoughtful consideration!

Alena Ross Becker, BA (She/Her)

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