

Dear Concerned Parties,

My name is Michael Couture. As a Howard Center board member, a person in long-term recovery, and an emergency department recovery coach at UVM Medical Center, I am deeply alarmed by our community's mental health crisis and the lag in supporting those tasked with treatment. Daily, I witness individuals with substance use disorder in the ED, most self-medicating to cope with lifelong trauma, indicative of severe mental health challenges. Most are unhoused, struggling to care for themselves or seek employment, let alone address their families' needs or even able to consider a job. In the ED they arrive stigmatized, intoxicated, freezing, tired, hungry, disoriented, suicidal, or in need of overdose intervention.

My role involves connecting these individuals with essential resources like detox, medications for opioid use disorder services, treatment facilities, mental health services, sober living, and recovery centers and meetings. However, Vermont's insufficient resources - lack of housing, mental health beds, and rehab facilities - compound their suffering.

It's crucial to empower designated agencies such as the Howard Center with the funding and tools to address mental health access and treatment effectively. To that end, I respectfully request a 6.5% (\$14,616,695 in General Fund) increase in Medicaid rates for Designated and Specialized Service Agencies and that the State enforce the statute requiring the Administration to establish and propose funding for scheduled rate increases in alignment with increases given to state employees. I am grateful for the support our system of care has received over the past two years. I know we have many competing demands for our limited funding—but this request requires our support. The lives of Vermonters depend on it.

Sincerely,  
Michael Couture  
Howard Center Board Member