

FY26 Public Budget Testimony
Jennifer Stratton February 13th

Hello, my name is Jennifer Stratton, and I am the CEO at Lamoille County Mental Health Services, located in Morrisville, Vermont. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am here to advocate for a 6.2% Medicaid rate increase for designated and specialized service agencies like ours. This increase is essential for us to continue providing the critical services for Vulnerable Vermonters.

I would like to begin by expressing our deep gratitude to the legislature for your ongoing support of Vermonters' health and wellbeing. We especially appreciate your continued commitment to supporting rate increases for designated and specialized service agencies. Your dedication helps ensure that these essential services are available to those who need them most. Thank you for recognizing the critical role these agencies play in the lives of Vermonters.

Our agency like other DA's and SSA have a staffing shortage. It is not that we can't find staff that have the necessary education, heart and passion to complete this work. It is that these individuals can't afford to work for the salary that we are offering, and we are losing the staff that we have because they cannot afford to stay. We have client's that are making more than our DSP who are providing support to them. In some instances we are having to contract out with outside entities that are charging a lot more per hour than we pay our staff. Our existing staff are very overwhelmed trying to cover all the needs that we have in the agency due to staff shortage. Now that we have established that we are vastly underpaid, and understaffed who ultimately suffers the consequences of this? The vulnerable Vermonters who need our services, the people who need us and are counting on us.

Last year our agency paid about 4.3 million dollars for our Health Care Plan. This year we have had to make some drastic changes to our Health Insurance Plan as that was not sustainable. Our staff is feeling this shift as now they are having to pay significantly more for their health care than previously and are already underpaid. Without rate increases, our operational costs rise, but our funding does not, effectively reducing our resources each year. Increases in Medicaid rates have not kept pace with the consumer price index, leading to a cumulative shortfall in funding compared to the rising cost of living and service provision.

To support Vermonters and address these challenges, a Medicaid rate increase of 6.2% is essential. This increase will ensure that agencies like ours can continue to provide vital mental health, substance use and developmental services to our community. The Clients are counting on us to receive the funding so that we can help support them in leading a typical full life that is what all we all want. Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration of this urgent matter.

Jennifer Stratton, CEO at Lamoille County Mental Health Services.