

Good morning. I am Representative Esme Cole of Hartford, and I am on the Committee on Human Services. I'm here to ask that we reinstate and protect the \$1.5 million in Reach Up funding for Designated Agencies which was removed in the Governor's proposed FY27 budget within the Dept. of Mental Health.

Reach Up provides a financial benefit to families working toward stability. But the benefit alone is not enough for many participants. The reality is that mental health and substance use challenges are often the primary barriers preventing people from maintaining work, caring for their families, and moving toward long-term independence.

Through a partnership between Economic Services Reach Up staff and Designated Agencies, specialized clinicians and wellness staff provide low-barrier support to Reach Up participants across the state. Put simply, Reach Up provides the benefit and Designated Agencies provide the services that make success possible. Over 400 Vermonters each year are supported with mental health services through this model and would be affected by the proposed cut.

I am deeply concerned about ending the formal partnership that has benefited our state for well over a decade. Listening to members who have been in the building much longer than myself, the establishment of this partnership was very intentional, and cost-effectively designed to fill a gap in access to mental health services for Vermont's most vulnerable. It removes many of the administrative barriers associated with getting access to mental health care. It's proven successful.

This program works because it meets people where they are. Services are flexible and relationship-based, allowing individuals to engage without navigating a traditional intake process or waiting until they are already in crisis. The warm handoff between Reach Up case managers and community mental health providers builds trust first, then connects people to the right level of care whether that is counseling, substance use treatment, or additional community support.

These are vulnerable Vermonters who are often hesitant to seek treatment on their own. Without this partnership, many would disengage from services entirely, making it far more difficult to maintain employment, achieve stability, or remain safely housed.

This investment represents preventative, community-based care. It reduces crises, supports workforce participation, and strengthens families while avoiding more costly emergency or institutional services down the road.

I respectfully ask the Legislature to restore the \$1.5 million in Reach Up funding to Designated Agencies so this proven partnership can continue helping Vermonters move toward stability, employment, and healthier lives.

Thank you for your time and consideration.