



To: Senate and House Appropriations Committees  
From: Tonya Mason,  
Date: February 12, 2026  
Subject: FY27 Budget

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Chairs and members of the Committees, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

My name is Tonya Mason. I am the DS Director at Howard Center, representing the Designated and Specialized Service Agencies I am asking you to support a 3.5% inflationary increase for the DA/SSA system of care.

Howard Center delivers required, **essential community-based services and crisis response** for Vermont's health system. Every day, we provide mental health, substance use, and developmental services to people across our region, regardless of complexity, acuity, or ability to pay. Our dedicated staff support people through their most vulnerable moments, delivering mandated, person-centered services while maintaining community safety and creating meaningful opportunities for growth and independence.

More than 80 percent of our costs are personnel-related, which means inflation directly affects our ability to retain staff, maintain essential coverage, and meet our mandated responsibilities safely.

As wages, benefits, and operating expenses increase, providers are forced to absorb those costs. When community providers fall behind, the impact shows up elsewhere — in emergency departments, inpatient beds, law enforcement, and other higher-cost systems.

Families are also directly impacted by an already strained service system. We are currently supporting a young adult with co-occurring mental health and intellectual disability who is aging out of the school system and requires skilled 24/7 staffing to maintain both family and community safety. This young person has experienced significant trauma and expresses both homicidal and suicidal threats. Without stable, well-trained staff, family and community safety are at risk, emergency system uses increases, and this young person's long-term success is jeopardized.



An inflationary adjustment supports workforce stability, protects access to essential services, and helps ensure care continues to be delivered in lower-cost, community-based settings. Investing in us means investing in healthier communities with better outcomes.

We appreciate your partnership in sustaining these essential services.