

Dear lawmakers,

I am a private practice pediatrician and co-owner of Timber Lane Pediatrics, an independent practice serving 8,000+ kids in and around Chittenden County. We have offices in South Burlington, Burlington and Milton. 30% of the kids we serve have medicaid insurance. We are an independent practice owned by 6 women and we are part of the Primary Care Health Partners group, a consortium of independent primary care practices across VT.

As you well know we have many challenges in primary care and especially in independent practices. Our children and families are experiencing a mental health crisis. Our families are struggling and need more support then ever. There are not enough primary care physicians in rural parts of our state. It is hard to keep up with costs to run a business from staffing costs, healthcare costs for employees and general overhead costs.

As you can imagine, the Blue Print Expansion program that gave money to primary care offices to integrate mental health care into our office was a life line. At Timber Lane Pediatrics we used that funding to partner with local mental health care agencies (Howard Center and Vermont Center for Resiliency) to embedded therapists in our offices. These therapists work with kids and families of all ages. Some of my patients who have accessed mental health care right in their pediatric medical home include a patient who's dad is having significant struggles with alcoholism and suicidality. Another family has adopted 2 foster kids and the children are having significant arguments at home, they work together in sibling therapy.

We also received funding to offer DULCE at all 3 of our offices. This is a true example of an upstream services with incredible downstream impacts. We have funding for a Family Specialist who works with all families with newborns from birth until 6 months of age. They screen for social determinants of health and help connect families to resources. Patients who are experiencing eviction can get help from DULCE and the connection to VT Legal Aid. A patient of mine just learned their unborn child has Down Syndrome and has already connected to our Family Specialist to connect to resources in the area to support this family as they welcome their newborn with complex health conditions.

I am asking you to keep these services going. These are essential services to the care that I provide to my community. These are essential services to the kids of Vermont. These are essential services to **your** constituents. These services improve the health of **your** state. Funding primary care, especially independent primary care, in the state of Vermont leads to a healthier population at a fraction of the cost of larger health institutions.

Please work with the legislature to address the gaps left by not joining AHEAD until 2027. Please include in teh SFY2026 budget one-time funding of \$5.5million for primary care programs and \$4.5million in state funds to continue Medicare-funded Blueprint for Health programs. Please include funding for expanding the Blueprint's embedded mental health supports. Please include funding to continue the DULCE expansion program to continue to support new families in the state of VT.

If you would like further examples of how these programs impact children every day in our practice please reach out, I have about 8,000 stories for you.

Leah Costello , MD
Timber Lane Pediatrics