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FY27 Budget Request: Please support Bridges to Health with a \$500,000 appropriation for Fiscal Year 2027.

Testimony on February 10, 2026 to House Committee on Health Care

Olivia Sharrow, MPH
Executive Director, Vermont's Free & Referral Clinics
On behalf of Bridges to Health

Chair Black and members of the House Committee on Health Care,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in strong support of **Bridges to Health's Fiscal Year 2027 budget request of \$500,000 in state funding** to ensure the continued operation and long-term sustainability of this essential program.

Funding at this level will preserve access to trusted, community-based programs and healthcare services for im/migrant community members at one of the most challenging times we've experienced.

I am here in my capacity as the Executive Director of Vermont's Free & Referral Clinics (VFRC). VFRC will become the new fiscal sponsor of Bridges to Health beginning on July 1, 2026. VFRC is a statewide nonprofit association with eight free clinic members throughout the state. These organizations provide free services to Vermonters who are uninsured, underinsured, or otherwise face significant barriers to accessing the health care system.

Bridges to Health is a uniquely effective health outreach and care coordination program serving immigrant and migrant workers and their families across Vermont who are frequently excluded from or unable to access traditional health and social service systems. In 2025, through its regionally based Community Health Workers, the program served almost 1,500 individuals, providing culturally responsive, trusted, one-on-one support to navigate health care, including through language access, transportation, food access, and other basic needs. These relationships are built over time and are foundational to whether individuals seek care early or delay until a medical crisis occurs. This work addresses persistent gaps in language access and health system navigation **that are not otherwise being met by other healthcare delivery entities.**

As the Committee is aware, Bridges to Health must transition away from the University of Vermont by the end of FY26. VFRC has agreed to serve as fiscal sponsor, beginning in FY27, to provide the administrative infrastructure necessary for the program to continue and thus support care continuity and preserve trusted relationships.

Bridges to Health's FY27 budget request will cover only a portion of their total operating budget for FY27. However, it will act as an essential stabilizing funding source and will bolster this program that serves communities across the state.

By supporting access to preventive and primary care, Bridges to Health helps reduce reliance on emergency rooms for non-acute needs and in this way, limit system costs and emergency room burden. The program also addresses persistent gaps in language access and health system navigation that the broader system is not currently equipped to meet. From our perspective, without Bridges to Health, many migrant and immigrant Vermonters would have no realistic pathway to care outside of emergency settings—resulting in poorer health outcomes and higher system-wide costs.

Ensuring dependable FY27 funding for Bridges to Health is not simply a programmatic decision; it is an investment in health equity, and system efficiency and sustainability. Vermont's Free & Referral Clinics is committed to serving as a supportive and mission-aligned fiscal sponsor.

We respectfully urge the Committee to support Bridges to Health's FY27 budget request. Thank you for your consideration and for your continued commitment to the health and well-being of Vermont's communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today,



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