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February 13, 2026

Representative Alyssa Black
Chair of House Committee on Health Care

Representative Theresa Wood
Chair of House Committee on Human Services

Representative Robin Scheu
Chair of House Committee on Appropriations

SENT VIA EMAIL

Dear Chairpersons Black, Wood, and Scheu:

The purpose of this letter is to ask for your support of the Howard Center Community Outreach Program and for your advocacy against the proposed elimination of \$160,000 in annual funding for this program as is currently proposed in the Vermont Department of Mental Health's FY27 Budget, presented by DMH Commissioner Hawes to the House Committee on Appropriations on January 28, 2026.

In Vermont, health and human services were removed from local government in the 1960's. At that time, and continuing today, the State of Vermont collects taxes and has in-house and significant contracted support to operate these services. A coalition of ten communities in Chittenden County provide \$337,000 or 46% of the \$736,000 in annual funding for the Howard Community Outreach program. The remaining funding has been provided by the University of Vermont Medical Center, Vermont State Police and Vermont Department of Mental Health as these partners recognized a benefit from the services that were provided.

The concept of the Howard Community Outreach program took shape in Chittenden County in 2017 as town and city managers, and police, fire and rescue chiefs, along with representatives from the University of Vermont Medical Center and the Howard Center began to meet in a community collaborative to identify shortcomings in regional mental health response and delivery programs, and to develop appropriate responses. The strong message from the first responder leadership was that the number of calls from residents experiencing mental health crises, including suicide, was on the rise and that existing programs were falling short of meeting demand. Also discussed was the increase in the

number of residents making repetitive and ongoing calls to first responders, which created a significant demand on limited resources.

Since inception, this program continues to serve the identified unmet needs of the residents of the ten Chittenden County communities that currently participate, and creates a supportive presence in those communities, providing a quick response in advance of, in partnership with, or after involvement by, local law enforcement for individuals with social service needs, destigmatizing problem behaviors that are non-criminal and often based in the individual's mental health or substance use instability. This approach allows police to be able to use resources more effectively to address criminal behaviors and to enhance the general wellbeing of local communities.

The Community Outreach team provides effective needs assessment and develops strategies that connect individuals experiencing mental health, substance use, housing or other social service needs with appropriate resources, reducing the need for police or rescue involvement. The community outreach team lends aid in three major capacities – diversion, assistance, and proactive work. Depending on the dispatch, police are often able to divert non-emergent or non-dangerous calls over to the community outreach team, freeing up officers to attend to the more urgent cases.

Along the same lines, Community Outreach teams examine data and look for patterns developing with individuals in the community, allowing the team to be proactive in their outreach efforts and help prevent these harmful patterns from continuing. Team members work hard to develop relationships and trust with the first responders in each community, as well as the individuals or families that might need to access these resources.

The Howard Community Outreach team supports but does not replace the need for public safety responses to community members needing staff trained in navigating health, mental health, and human services network and services. The staff on the Community Outreach team serve adults, children and families, and work closely with local law enforcement to provide the best services to residents with the lowest level of intervention possible.

The Community Outreach team and First Call for Chittenden County, both Howard Center programs, work together and act as resources and referral sources for each other, including consultation regarding clients, creating intervention/response strategies, and alerting each other to client behaviors in the community. The Community Outreach team provides intervention and support as the core functions while First Call for Chittenden County provides assessment and clinical consultation.

Clients can self-refer to Community Outreach, or they can be engaged by a team member in participating communities. The team also receives referrals from service providers, police, family members or friends, merchants, and concerned community members.

The concept of a statewide response that would provide services to individuals like what Community Outreach and First Call accomplishes in Chittenden County, was developed and ultimately launched on January 1, 2024, as the Statewide Enhanced Mobile Crisis Program. This initiative was led by the Health Care & Rehabilitation Services of Southeastern Vermont (HCRS) and funded by the Vermont Department of Mental Health. HCRS subcontracts with nine other community mental health agencies in Vermont to provide Enhanced Mobile Crisis services in their respective regions.

Howard Center is the community mental health agency for Chittenden County and therefore provides these services when calls to the Enhanced Mobile Crisis line originate from Chittenden County. Now that they provide services through Community Outreach and as part of the statewide Enhanced Mobile Crisis Program, they must charge a separate billing rate based on how the call originated.

The Enhanced Mobile Crisis Program utilizes the Suicide Hotline, 9-8-8, as a Lifeline for folks who need services. On the Vermont Department of Mental Health's website, it provides a [detailed explanation](#) of what happens when you call the Lifeline; first, they will hear an automated greeting message and be asked to press 1 if they are a U.S. military veteran or current service member; if not, they will be placed on hold while their call is routed to the nearest crisis center in their network. While on hold, the caller will hear music while waiting to be connected to a skilled, trained crisis counselor. Ultimately, when the call originates from within Chittenden County, after the original automated messaging, and waiting time while on hold, it will likely be routed to First Call for Chittenden County.

First Call for Chittenden County has been the 24/7/365 live person phone support and mobile crisis intake for children, families and adults since FY17, to help them identify and access needed services. Prior to FY17, First Call was the intake line for all of Howard Center's Child, Youth, and Family Services in Chittenden County. In FY17, the two programs were joined into one integrated crisis program.

While we understand and support the need for all other parts of the state to benefit from a program like Community Outreach and First Call for Chittenden County, any such program relies on the availability of workers, of which we are short of in Vermont, especially for mental health related positions.

Rather than create more hurdles and potentially increase response times in an area of the state that already has a developed program, why not apply additional resources to areas of



the state where similar programs are needed, but importantly, not take away resources from a developed program. While the Statewide Enhanced Mobile Crisis Program appears to have launched on January 1, 2024, it doesn't appear that law enforcement departments in Chittenden County have been made aware of this resource even two years later and continue to rely on the support services provided through the Community Outreach Program.

This partnership with the Howard Community Outreach program allows police officers to focus on their core safety responsibilities while connecting residents with the care they need, it also provides a proactive approach to identify underlying issues in the community before they escalate to criminal activity or result in unnecessary emergency room visits.

We urge your support in advocating for the funding to be reinstated in the FY27 budget for the Howard Community Outreach Program which serves the following Chittenden County communities: Town of Essex, City of Essex Junction, Milton, Colchester, Winooski, South Burlington, Shelburne, Williston, Richmond and Hinesburg. Without this essential funding, it will likely make this successful program unsustainable for many of these communities that are served.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Peter Hull
Chief of Police

Renae Marshall
Deputy Town Manager

Cc: Senator Patrick Brennan, Colchester Representatives: Gayle Pezzo, Doug Bishop, Sarita Austin and Wendy Critchlow