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February 11, 2026

Representative Lori Houghton
House Majority Leader, Health Care Committee Member
City of Essex Junction
Chittenden 22

Dear Representative Houghton:

While reviewing the proposed budget for FY 27 for the Vermont Department of Mental Health, it appears that they have eliminated funding for the Community Outreach Team here in Chittenden County. You might recall, this funding of \$160,000 was placed back into the FY26 budget after a similar request last year. We are writing to urge you to support returning this funding to the final FY27 State of Vermont budget.

As you know, a coalition of ten communities in Chittenden County provides \$337,000 or 46% of the annual funding for Howard Community Outreach's \$736,000 annual program. The funding received via the VT Department of Mental Health is key to the functioning of the program and as outlined below, aligns with the stated goals of both VDMH and Governor Scott's administration. Howard Community Outreach workers support public safety response to community members needing staff trained in navigating the health, mental health, and human services network and services. Community Outreach workers support not only the work of law enforcement, but also Essex Rescue, the Essex Westford School District, businesses and individual citizens. They do so by providing trained staff who are a connection to social services for those in need of drug treatment, housing and mental health support. They are the co-responders that public safety depends on to assist when people are in crisis.

The elimination of this funding in the proposed VDMH budget is contradictory to the goals and objectives outlined in their budget presentation. In this, they outline the effectiveness of a community-based response to mental health crisis and point out that their model emphasizes the importance of crisis response teams and eliminating barriers to wellness. Community Outreach is the standard for this type of response and has been a model for others in Vermont and around the country by aiding people where they live through personal contact and referrals to services. Further, VDMH states that mobile crisis response is a particularly important element of their overall plan to address mental health crisis in Vermont. While First Call may be the ideal mobile crisis response since CO staff are not trained clinicians, First Call is understaffed and many times their clinicians are with other

clients and unable to respond immediately. That leaves it to Community Outreach, law enforcement and EMS. It seems only sensible that funding would not be eliminated as the program has been so effective here in Chittenden County.

The work of Community Outreach also aligns with the points outlined in Governor Scott's budget address a few weeks ago. He again reaffirmed his administration's commitment to support mental health, addiction treatment and recovery as part of an overall effort to reduce crime and increase public safety. Community Outreach participates in three of the four 'legs of the stool', those being Prevention, Treatment and Recovery. Again, for those who need treatment, the CO staff are a direct line to the resources that are needed and often are the caring person who might convince someone to finally enter a treatment program. A large part of the Governor's address and the overall conversation in Montpelier surrounds the lack of suitable housing with many community members suffering from inadequate or a lack of housing. In particular, those who were affected by the elimination of the housing program are often in need of connection to emergency shelters and support services. A part of what Community Outreach does is just that, connecting people to services and support such as a solid place to live. In fact, in the first half of their fiscal year, Community Outreach has had nineteen instances where they have assisted people in Essex Junction/Essex with housing concerns.

The Towns served by Community Outreach depend on them to increase wellness and safety in their communities. While the Towns should bear some financial responsibility for the team, the State of Vermont is primarily responsible for health and human services and should be solid financial partners with the Towns who have invested in this service. As stated above, the Community Outreach Team provides a service that benefits all who live in our communities as well as being part of the effort to better serve the citizens of the State. Please let us know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Ron Hoague, Chief of Police
Essex Police Department

Greg Duggan, Town Manager
Town of Essex

Regina Mahony, City Manager
City of Essex Junction