

Testimony to House Committee on Human Services

January 8, 2026

Chair Wood and members of the House Committee on Human Services, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Alison Lamagna, and I am the Executive Director of the United Ways of Vermont and Vermont 211. I began in this role in May of this year, about 8 months ago. I know many of you are familiar with VT 211; our mission is to promote the health and well-being of all people in Vermont through a statewide information and referral system for streamlined access to community resources. At a time of increasing need, shifting federal policy, and continued strain on state and local services, it is critical that Vermont's 211 system is fully functional, visible, and prepared to respond.

I am here today to ask the Committee to include \$20,000 for VT 211 in your budget adjustment memo to the House Appropriations Committee in FY26 that would allow VT 211 to recruit and hire an Outreach and Communications Manager at the start of our fiscal year on April 1, 2026. This will allow us to reestablish a robust, intentional outreach program.

For a quick refresher and a bit more background; the United Ways of VT is an independent 501c3 nonprofit organization. In 2004 we were officially designated as the agency for 211 services in VT, solidifying our important role in the state's infrastructure for ensuring that Vermonters across the state can connect to critical health and human services, and to assist with response and recovery in times of disaster. Additionally, we represent Vermont in the national 211 infrastructure and network.

We are a nationally accredited Information & Referral service, which means that our database must adhere to national standards and best practices and is reviewed for re-accreditation every five years. Our staff are also certified Resource Specialists and Database Curators, upholding national standards for providing resources to the public.

VT 211 receives an average of 52,000 contacts from Vermonters every year (in 2025 we received 61,654), and our database currently contains more than 1100 agencies and 3100 programs across the state. Many know us for our work supporting the state with the emergency housing program, and with disaster response. However, our work is broader than this and includes helping Vermonters connect to resources for other basic needs, and some resources that are less visible. In 2025, our top requests for referrals besides housing were for utilities, transportation, tax preparation services, public assistance, food,

legal services, health services, mental health, and other specialized services for children and families, older adults, and disability services.

As many of you also know, VT 211 has been under-resourced for many years and has had to meet growing demand with limited capacity. Thanks to the support of this Committee, we are beginning to move toward greater stability. We have taken important steps to modernize our services, including refreshing and updating our online, searchable database, which helps us meet Vermonters where they are and reduces barriers to accessing information. With this new capacity, it is essential to invest in the infrastructure that allows VT 211 to function as a reliable, statewide system so Vermonters can consistently access accurate information, and the state can depend on 211 during both day-to-day needs and emergencies.

Things are changing quickly in terms of what services are needed, and what is available amid federal cuts, changes to benefits, and competing priorities. This funding will help ensure that we have the systems and infrastructure in place so that:

- 1) Vermonters and community service providers in every corner of the state know that VT 211 exists, how to use it, and how to refer people to it. It will strengthen the state's health and human services infrastructure by ensuring that Vermonters can reliably find, understand, and access the services that already exist. This ensures that the state's investments in services are actually reachable by the people they are intended to serve, and that community partners consistently use VT 211 as the front door to assistance, reducing duplication, improving coordination, and helping people get connected faster.
  - a. For example, this capacity would allow us to regularly attend important resource fairs, community meetings, and other events, and support the more hyper-local, grassroots VT initiatives by being a resource, supporter, and collaborator.
- 2) This capacity will ensure that VT 211 maintains the most inclusive, accurate resources in our database so that all Vermonters, wherever they live in the state, can access the resources they need. New resources are always coming online, and some are closing their doors. We need to be able to capture every resource, no matter how small and localized. This allows policymakers, agencies, and providers to rely on a single, trusted source of truth about available services statewide.
  - a. For example, there are many small, rural, hyper-local resources that lack a staff or budget to do their own outreach to VT 211 - small, basement food shelves staffed by a volunteer. We are currently working on an initiative in Bethel, VT helping local providers to understand how to best utilize our

online database to create lists and avoid duplication, and also to troubleshoot how community liaisons can work with 211 to ensure all of the teeny tiny resources in their area are represented and accurate in our database. With this added capacity, we could do this in many more small towns across VT.

- 3) Finally, this added capacity will allow VT 211 to focus more on data, supporting state agencies, service providers, and lawmakers with sharing actionable, reliable data and to serve as a statewide barometer of need during periods of disruption and policy change.
  - a. For example, we can provide a statewide snapshot, regional data, and collated data around specific issues such as housing, transportation, utilities, etc.

As a new Executive Director, I have spent the past several months listening closely to staff, partners, and community organizations across the state. What I hear consistently is that VT 211 is trusted, relied upon, and essential, but that long-standing capacity gaps have been limiting. This request is about ensuring Vermont has a strong, stable, and responsive 211 system to respond to the current changing and dynamic environment.

I respectfully ask for your support in including this adjustment in your Committee's recommendation to the House Appropriations Committee. I would be happy to answer any questions.

Thank you for your continued support of VT 211 and for your commitment to ensuring Vermonters can access the services they need to thrive.