



United Ways of Vermont

VT 211 Testimony: House Committee on Human Services

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The Governor's proposed FY27 budget reduces VT 211's funding by \$332,000. We are requesting sustainable, level funding of \$1,638,029, consistent with FY26.

Last year, the Legislature invested an additional \$332,000 in VT 211's base funding to support full operations. Prior to that investment, our base budget covered only 84% of the true cost of running the program. The additional \$332,000 did not represent the cost of overnight services; it brought VT 211 to its actual, full operational cost for core services.

That sustainable funding level allowed us to fill critical call center staffing gaps, maintain backup coverage overnight and on weekends and holidays, implement on-call staffing, maintain our 24/7 online database and call center operations, and allow us to respond during emergencies. It aligned our funding with the real cost of operating a healthy, responsive 211 system.

We continue to analyze our call data and operations closely and confer with staff and community partners on how to best meet community needs. Demand peaks consistently between 4:00 and 10:00 p.m. Call volume drops significantly after 10:00 p.m., which coincides with the time of day when there are limited active services available for referral. Based on this data, and in recognition of the challenging funding cycle this year, we are not requesting an increase. We are proposing to use state resources responsibly by reallocating overnight resources to adequately staff our peak hours which will ensure timely responses and limit wait times. Additionally, we are working to provide improved ways for people to access accurate information during overnight hours, such as strengthening our database and phone systems. In FY27, services will remain available seven days per week, 365 days per year, including weekends and holidays, with the searchable database available 24/7. Overnight callers can be directed to 911 or 988 through our Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system, ensuring urgent needs are met.

Demand is also not static throughout the year; it spikes immediately during crises. When SNAP benefits were threatened in November, call volume surged. During extreme cold, housing rule changes, or natural disasters, calls increase rapidly. We anticipate even greater volatility as federal policy and eligibility changes impact Vermonters. At a time



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when families, communities, and state agencies are under strain, the state relies on VT 211 to absorb demand, adapt quickly, and divert non-emergency calls away from emergency services, reinforcing 211 as the front door to Vermont's health and human services system. This is also why we support the Benefits Assisters initiative.

It's important to note, if the General Assistance housing program returns to daily adverse weather eligibility determinations, as proposed by the Governor, VT 211 would likely experience consistent high call volumes throughout the winter from individuals trying to understand whether they qualify for shelter. That would create an administrative and logistical strain on our call center and almost certainly increase wait times for people needing shelter.

At the same time, VT 211's technology systems are critically outdated. We are operating on database software that is more than 20 years old, which is losing functionality and limiting our ability to keep pace with national 211 standards. By fully funding our base services this year, we can stabilize operations while also beginning to update technology, strengthen data reporting, improve overnight access to information, and position VT 211 to leverage other funding for innovative community health initiatives.

Put simply, a \$332,000 reduction would directly jeopardize our ability to support the emergency housing program, activate during disasters, respond to policy changes, and maintain adequate staffing. We are not asking for more. We are asking to maintain level funding of \$1,638,029 so VT 211 can continue connecting Vermonters to help when it matters most.