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## **Vermont Family Network Testimony – Mental Health Advocacy Day**

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony for Mental Health Advocacy Day.

Vermont Family Network (VFN) is Vermont's federally designated Parent Training and Information Center, a network created by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, as well as Vermont's Family-to-Family Health Information Center, and the Vermont Chapter of Family Voices and Parent-to-Parent USA. We have a singular mission:

**To empower and support all Vermont children, youth, and families, especially those with disabilities or special health needs. We do this by giving a strong start, lifting family voices, and advancing inclusive communities.**

VFN has been empowering and supporting families for over 30 years! VFN is home to a team of trained Family Support Consultants who are themselves parents of children with disabilities. That lived experience means we get it! We do our best to help families navigate Vermont's complex and siloed special education, mental health, and other service systems based on our own lived experience and our professional knowledge.

VFN provides support in a variety of ways, including through a statewide helpline, one-on-one support, connecting parents to others through our parent-to-parent match program, supporting parents as parent representatives at Coordinated Service Plan meetings, representing the family perspective at Local Interagency Team meetings, supporting social health and wellness through our Sibshops programming, creating opportunities in schools to talk about disability and mental health differences through our Puppets in Education program, and offering training and written resources to parents, families, and professionals. An important part of our purpose is helping parents and families understand their rights to a Free and Appropriate Public Education in the Least Restrictive Environment for their child.

Why do parents contact VFN? The truth is families reach out to us when something is not working for their child or family. By the time families are connecting with us, there are already issues that they want to talk about and try to work through. These issues vary in intensity and

more frequently families are already at a crisis point when they contact us. In the school year 2024-2025, we had 5,250 contacts with parents and nearly half (2,050) of those contacts were with parents of children with mental health diagnoses. It's also important to remember that many children have co-occurring disability and mental health needs, and both must be addressed at the same time for children to succeed in school. Families of children with mental health needs tell us about many ongoing and worsening issues including:

- School anxiety that leads to frequent absences
- Bullying and cyberbullying that create unsafe school environments
- Increased usage of suspension and expulsion
- Lack of behavior assessments and behavior support plans
- Behavior plans not being followed due to lack of staff or training
- Required meetings not being held when behavior leads to discipline
- Students on 504 plans not being evaluated before school placement changes
- Schools refusing special education evaluations for children with mental health needs
- A shortage of school-based and community mental health services
- Few alternative education options
- Online schooling suggested when in-person schooling does not meet a child's needs
- Very young children experiencing serious trauma and needing high-level services
- High levels of substance use among youth
- Families under extreme stress, with more children placed in kinship care
- Grandparents struggling to parent children with challenges

Perhaps most troubling is a trend of teachers misunderstanding how a disability or mental health condition manifests as a behavior in the classroom and then blaming students or families. Some potential solutions to better support our students and families include:

- Annual trainings for new 504 coordinators and classroom teachers about best practices for supporting students with disabilities
- Additional training on conducting a behavior assessment & administering a behavior plan
- Use of restorative justice practices in schools
- More trauma-informed training
- Increased mental health funding and collaboration between schools and mental health agencies, including increased support for models like Success Beyond Six
- Access to mentors and positive adult role models
- Clear limits on phone and social media use at school
- Better coordination between education, mental health, medical, and developmental services systems

Lastly, as the state takes up the issue of education transformation this legislative session, please remember to consider the impact of potential changes on vulnerable children with disabilities, because ALL children have a right to an education. Thank you again for the opportunity to share this testimony.