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TO: Senate Health and Welfare Committee
FROM: Vermont Care Partners
RE: FY26 Budget Bill Ask

Good morning, my name is Amy Johnson, and I'm here representing Vermont Care Partners - the network of 16 Designated and Specialized Service Agencies. We are asking for your help to keep the lights on and services going. We are requesting a 6.2% Medicaid rate increase - \$13.95 million in General Fund dollars. A COLA for DAs/SSAs is currently in the House version of the budget bill.

Together, our agencies are part of the backbone of Vermont's community-based system of care - with roughly 5,000 dedicated staff delivering essential services to Vermonters in every corner of the state. We provide prevention, intervention, crisis, and postvention supports. So what's at risk when we don't invest? The full crisis continuum - 9-8-8, mobile crisis teams, crisis beds, and emergency department alternatives. We're in homes, in schools, embedded with law enforcement and primary care. We deliver suicide prevention services, substance use treatment, outpatient therapy, home visiting community doulas and perinatal clinicians, social drivers of health supports (such as supports for unhoused individuals and families), and essential supports for children and adults with complex needs. And so much more.

We keep people out of emergency departments.
We keep people in their communities.
We keep people alive.

These are state services. We are contracted, regulated, and accountable to the state, with over 60 performance measures in our provider agreement. And yet, year after year, inflationary increases are not guaranteed, despite what's written in state statute. Without these increases, the gap between what we're paid and what it costs to deliver care keeps growing. Currently, there's an 11.47% variance between where the Consumer Price Index is and where we are as a network. That difference is not just a number, it's a threat to our workforce and the people we serve.

Predictable, regular increases are essential to building sustainable budgets, retaining and recruiting staff, and simply keeping the doors open.

Our agencies are working constantly and collaboratively, not only with one another but with community organizations across Vermont, to create efficiencies, share resources, and develop

A Statewide Network Supporting Vermonters to Lead Healthy and Satisfying Lives Community by Community
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innovative models of care. But even the most efficient system cannot survive without sufficient investment. And that investment must start with people.

The individuals we serve need consistency in the staff supporting them, because it's those trusted relationships that foster gains, stability, and hope. When staff leave because wages are not competitive, those relationships are broken. And as the Oliver Wyman report clearly states, we must support community services and invest aggressively in the workforce if we want a healthcare system that's both effective, affordable, and sustainable.

The legislature has helped us in past years, and we're truly grateful. We've seen even modest increases reduce turnover and improve recruitment. But it's not enough. Our staff, the people showing up every day for Vermonters, should have the same level of support and investment as those working within state government. We support the cost-of-living increases for state workers and there should be parity for our workforce delivering essential state services.

The people who care for the most acute and vulnerable community members deserve to live with stability and dignity in the communities they serve. When they can't, we risk weakening the very system Vermonters rely on in their most critical moments.

If we continue to underfund this system, we will see exactly what you're trying to prevent: increased emergency department use, higher healthcare costs, worsening mental health and substance use challenges, and more Vermonters in crisis with nowhere to turn. We are the safety net. And if we fail, the entire system feels it.

To the nearly 40,000 people we serve every year, and the thousands more we keep from needing more intensive and expensive care, this funding matters. And it DOES make a real difference.

Please help us to protect this critical system for Vermonters.

Best,

Amy Johnson
Director of Government Affairs
Vermont Care Partners
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