



125 Tremont St Barre, VT 05641

director@vtfreeclinics.org

www.vtfreeclinics.org

**Testimony - Olivia Sharrow, MPH
Executive Director
Vermont's Free & Referral Clinics**

**Senate Committee on Health and Welfare –
April 2, 2026**

**We ask that the Committee support our
budget request as it appears in the House
Committee on Appropriations' budget.**

The included \$924,000 represents \$462,000 from the General Fund which will be matched by \$462,000 in federal Medicaid dollars.

Who We Are

Our Mission: Vermont's Free & Referral Clinics advocates for a more inclusive, equitable, and accessible healthcare system.

Vermont's Free & Referral Clinics (VFRC) was founded in 1995 under the name the Coalition of Clinics for the Uninsured. Today the nonprofit association has expanded to include eight member clinics across Vermont that provide free health services.

Member clinics serve as health system entry points, operate as safety net organizations, and provide vital preventative and primary care services, particularly those patients experiencing barrier to care within our healthcare system.

On July 1, 2026, VFRC will become the fiscal sponsor of the Bridges to Health im/migrant community health worker program.

Our members' services are free to patients, regardless of insurance status.

Member Clinics Offer

- Free clinical services (medical, dental, mental health). In FY25 they provided:
 - **Over 4,500 medical visits**
 - **2,300 dental visits**
- Care coordination and case management, insurance navigation, assistance accessing state and federal programs, free prescriptions, and support enrolling in hospital financial assistance

Our Funding

- We receive a legislative appropriation of which 50% is from the General Fund and 50% is a federal match
- This appropriation is currently \$1.58 million
- The last increase we received was for FY23
- If our full request is granted, this would amount to \$272 per patient *per year*
- Other sources of funding include grants, town support, individual giving, and in-kind donations

We provide a very low-cost setting for patients to get the care they need, giving them a place to go instead of the emergency room.

We estimate that by diverting patients from the emergency room, we saved the state nearly \$5 million in FY25.

Our Patients in Numbers

- **In FY25, our members cared for 9,200 patients**
- Of those, **2,572 patients were new** to our clinics
- 33% of our patients were uninsured
- 28% of patients were underinsured
- Over 400 clinical and administrative volunteers in 2025 provided over 10,000 hours of volunteer time, valued at \$1.1 million

Providing services using volunteers can present challenges. However, this independence and structure allow the clinics to be nimble and shift services to meet the needs of their communities.

Challenges and Trends

The quality of care and passion of our staff and volunteers cannot be overstated. However, we also see concerning trends within our patient populations:

- **The number of un- and underinsured Vermonters is already rising**
- These numbers will increase as more changes to Medicaid eligibility and redeterminations are implemented
- The average income of patients seeking care at free clinics has increased in the last 10 years, as the

cost of living and of accessing services elsewhere increased

- **26% of patients arrive reporting delayed care** due to both cost and an inability to access providers. We also see bottlenecks with patients getting set up with a long-term primary care provider
- Patients are arriving with more complex physical, psychological, and social determinants of health needs

In Closing

We respectfully urge Committee members to support our budget line as it appears in the House budget.

Our request does *not* represent new programs. It is primarily to cover personnel costs to enable clinics to operate for more hours and see more patients during clinic hours.

This will allow us to scale up to meet rising clinical needs in our communities and deliver more care in the lowest cost healthcare delivery setting in the state.

It will allow us to assist even more Vermonters navigating health insurance and other benefits, at a time when barriers to enrollment are increasing.

We are on the front lines helping people navigate Vermont's fractured system. Now more than ever, investing in affordable settings and programs that reduce overall costs is crucial.

Thank you for your time and consideration of our request.