

Vermont Department of Health Substance Use Services Community Forums: What We Heard

Fall 2025

Between September 29 and October 29, 2025, the Department of Health (VDH) conducted community forums in each of the 12 AHS Districts statewide:

Barre	Middlebury	St. Albans
Bennington	Morrisville	St. Johnsbury
Brattleboro	Newport	Springfield
Burlington	Rutland	White River Junction

The purpose of these forums was to hear directly from providers, legislators, law enforcement, community members and others about how the substance use system of care was working in their areas – what was working well and areas of concern or for improvement.

Over 350 individuals attended, both in-person and virtually. Themes were well aligned with the recent Needs Assessment and Strategic Planning process that the VDH Division of Substance Use Programs underwent in 2024 and 2025, available via [VDH-DSU Programs and Services webpage](#).



HealthVermont.gov
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What we Heard: What is working well



- Appreciation for Prevention Consultant role in communities
- Community Initiatives/Organizations (e.g., Project Action, Project Vision, One Brattleboro, etc.)
- Public Safety Enhancement Team work, including Situation Tables
- School based health
- Recovery system is strong, appreciation for recovery centers and recovery coaching in emergency departments
- Community acceptance of naloxone
- Residential treatment access (including direct cell phone access to residential program intake coordinators and programming leads)
- Partnerships with law enforcement within the community
- Expanded street outreach

What We Heard: Areas for Improvement



Need to map services and referral/warm hand off strategies within communities and statewide

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 1: Coordination and Collaboration](#))

What we're doing

- VTHelplink substance use programs and services mapping enhancements
- High intensity residential aftercare navigators coming online
- High intensity residential pay for performance measure in place for aftercare planning
- Outreach and engagement workers through preferred provider network
- Rapid access to treatment/rapid access to medications for opioid use disorder project statewide
- Satellite dosing units for expanded methadone access
- Providing recovery supports to individuals in correctional facilities, post-incarceration, and through probation and parole through a cooperative initiative between the 13 recovery centers statewide and the Vermont Department of Corrections

- Joint effort of Vermonters for Criminal Justice Reform and Johnson Health Center for the Managed Medical Response Partnership



Need to streamline and systematize administrative processes (e.g., shared assessments, coordinated releases)

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 1: Coordination and Collaboration](#))

What we're doing

- Sharing information, as appropriate, is already an expectation in the VDH preferred provider treatment standards
- Hubs have a standardized release for guest dosing of medications for opioid use disorder
- Community partners have developed multi-party releases for their individual communities
- VDH engaged a consultant who works with recovery centers to identify opportunities to streamline and systematize administrative and internal control processes
- VDH implemented two payment models with recovery centers to advance Medicaid billing readiness



Need to increase number of in-person intensive outpatient programs

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 2: Expansion of Supports or Services](#))

What we're doing

- VDH is working with preferred providers on intensive outpatient program (IOP) service quality, including expansion of in-person options.
- VDH and the Department of Vermont Health Access (DVHA) – Vermont's Medicaid agency - are working to standardize expectations for and oversight of IOPs and to review their rate structures
- VDH contracts with quality improvement technical assistance to look at strategies to increase IOP census



Need to increase number of residential beds and length of stay

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 2: Expansion of Supports or Services](#))

What we're doing

- Additional low intensity residential bed capacity has come online (Valley Vista opened 27 new beds in Vergennes in December 2025). These beds allow for a longer length of stay.
- High intensity residential programs now have capacity to allow those who need it to step down to low intensity residential programming
- VDH is working with DVHA Payment Reform to review rates for residential services to ensure viability (per Act 22 of 2024)
- VDH pay for performance measures include looking at length of stay



Need to streamline and coordinate transitions between levels of care

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 1: Coordination and Collaboration](#))

What we're doing

- Aftercare navigators for high intensity residential programs
- Low intensity residential program expansion
- High intensity residential pay for performance incentives include aftercare planning
- Community meetings to strengthen partnerships and connections in communities with local and statewide resources.
- Peer supports in hospital emergency departments to help transition people from overdose to treatment
- Funding Northeast Kingdom Community Action for four peer support specialists to assist individuals with OUD who are transitioning out of homelessness into safe, permanent housing
- Funding Champlain Housing Trust for wound care and preventative health pilot in three low barrier shelters in Chittenden County
- Funding Umbrella (domestic and sexual violence organization serving the Northeast Kingdom) to provide integrated services between domestic and sexual violence providers and partners in recovery in northeastern VT
- Working with emergency departments to improve processes for transitioning people with SUD from EDs to treatment



Need to increase co-occurring substance use and mental health services, at all levels

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 2: Expansion of Supports or Services](#))

What we're doing

- Enhanced services at hubs, providing co-occurring substance use, mental health, and physical health care
- DMH/VDH Certified Community-Based Integrated Health Centers (CCBHCs)
- VDH treatment standards require co-occurring services
- Hub and Spoke Learning Collaborative regularly provides training on co-occurring services
- Integrated crisis beds evolution within the Designated Agency system – services for public inebriate programming and co-occurring substance use and mental health. Statewide implementation planned for 7/1/2026.



Need to enhance coordination between substance use, mental health, and physical health treatment services

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 1: Coordination and Collaboration](#))

What we're doing

- Enhanced services at hubs, providing co-occurring substance use, mental health, and physical health care
- DMH/VDH Certified Community-Based Integrated Health Centers (CCBHCs)
- Integrated crisis bed Initiative - VDH/DMH working with partners to integrate SUD into existing crisis bed programs
- DMH/VDH Mobile Crisis
- VDH/DSU Medical Director technical assistance contract – Dr. Chris Lukonis, board-certified psychiatrist, certified in addiction medicine



Need timely detox/withdrawal management services

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 2: Expansion of Supports or Services](#))

What we're doing

- VDH established a new Medicaid benefit for clinically managed withdrawal management (7/1/2025)
- High intensity residential programs can offer same day admissions when clinically appropriate and adequately staffed



Need to evaluate waitlists across the continuum

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 3: Resources & Capacity](#))

What we're doing

- VDH collects waitlist information as a part of our vendor management; VDH is actively working to bring on new preferred providers
- VDH is working to educate about why some people may "wait" for services
- VDH provides technical assistance to providers whose wait times exceed expectations



Need to develop SUD and co-occurring treatment opportunities that meet the need of Vermont's youth

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 2: Expansion of Supports or Services](#))

What we're doing

- Youth-focused intensive outpatient program training and support will begin January 2026
- DMH/VDH Certified Community-Based Integrated Health Centers (CCBHCs)
- VDH has contracted with a consultant to provide technical assistance to preferred providers that includes services for youth
- VDH funds family engagement services with two preferred providers
- Funding to Elevate Youth for Healthy Youth Program counselors the Basement Teen Center at Kellogg-Hubbard Library in Washington County
- Funding to Friends for Change Youth Center in Bellows Falls for intervention strategies and harm reduction supports to youth and young adults

- Funding for two positions at Spectrum Youth and Family Services to expand OUD screening, treatment and case management services to youth in Chittenden and Franklin Counties



Need to enhance full continuum services for older Vermonters, including addressing access to nursing home barriers related to SUD and MH

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 2: Expansion of Supports or Services](#))

What we're doing

- VDH partnered with UVM Health Network to admit people with skilled nursing facility needs who are on medications for opioid use disorder
- Specialized nursing facility in Bennington-VDH partnered for policy review to ensure access for people on methadone



Need to increase recovery shelter and recovery housing bed capacity (including for special populations)

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 2: Expansion of Supports or Services](#))

What we're doing

- Re-engagement beds available to support individuals who experience a recurrence of symptoms while in recovery housing
- Request for Proposals (RFPs) for additional recovery housing in process
- Fund recovery housing vouchers to cover fees and rent while residents stabilize in recovery
- Long term programs at shelters including harm reduction and clinical nursing supports (DCF)



Need to address transportation across all services

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 2: Expansion of Supports or Services](#))

What we're doing

- Recovery & Job Access Transportation (RJA) Program provides transportation to recovery centers and to job interviews/initial commutes for individuals in recovery. RJA expansion to include trips upon discharge from public inebriate program (PIP) - related facility

- Medicaid covers transportation for medically necessary services under the Medicaid benefit
- VDH has a representative on the Public Transit Advisory Council



Need to enhance supports for the whole family

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 2: Expansion of Supports or Services](#))

What we're doing

- Recovery Centers provide family coaching as well as family support groups
- VDH preferred providers can be reimbursed for family therapies
- Hub and Spoke health home services include services to families
- VDH funds family engagement services with two preferred providers
- Funding to Prevent Child Abuse VT for teaching parenting skills and providing social and emotional parenting supports for people with OUD



Need to increase prevention and early intervention services in schools that connect to the whole family

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 1: Coordination and Collaboration](#))

What we're doing

- Expand student assistance professionals and school-based services through the Substance Misuse Prevention Fund



Need to increase small group services in schools (e.g., nicotine cessation)

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 2: Expansion of Supports or Services](#))

What we're doing

- My Life My Quit - a free, confidential, text-based support program for teens (ages 13-17) to help them quit smoking, vaping, and other tobacco products
- Nicotine-Free Schools: A Policy Guide (June 2025) - [Nicotine-Free Schools: A Policy Guide for K-12](#)
- Expand student assistance professional and school-based services



Need to ensure individuals with lived and living experience are included in system design and evaluation

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 1: Coordination and Collaboration](#))

What we're doing

- People with lived experience are included in DSU's needs assessment and strategic planning processes
- Client and participant interviews conducted as part of the preferred provider and Recovery Service Organization certification process to inform ongoing quality improvement work
- Evaluating impact of services at Jenna's Promise with those who have exited the program
- OPC Guidelines require that people with lived experience are included in the overdose prevention center planning



Need to increase prevention programming and coalition support statewide through Vermont Prevention Lead Organization structure

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 2: Expansion of Supports or Services](#))

What we're doing

- Vermont Prevention Lead Organization (VPLO) regional structure that ties regional assessment and priorities to funding allocations – over 60 subgrants statewide fund prevention coalitions and other prevention partners.
- This additional funding is allowing the state to expand and enhance its substance misuse prevention system and the VPLO structure will continue to develop and evolve.



The SUD continuum (prevention, intervention, harm reduction, treatment, and recovery services) is asked to do more with less, funding does not keep up with expectations or inflation.

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 3: Resources & Capacity](#))

What we're doing

- Rate studies underway for treatment services partnering with DVHA Payment Reform team
- Vermont Prevention Lead Organizations (VPLOs) have increased funding for prevention, have increased coordination and leveraged additional dollars for each regional organization)



Need to facilitate/implement strategies to address stigma and community compassion fatigue

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 3: Resources & Capacity](#))

What we're doing

- VT CARES conducts harm reduction training that provides an overview of the complexity of substance use disorder and the evidence-based nature of harm reduction. This training was originally developed for first responders and includes testimonials from people about how care from first responders changed their lives. This training has also been used with community groups.
- Funding to DAIL to provide specialized employment services (HireAbility) for individuals with OUD



Need to address the current state of the workforce across the continuum of care

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 3: Resources & Capacity](#))

What we're doing

- The federal Overdose Data to Action grant (OD2A) will be doing an evaluation focused on the recovery and syringe services program workforce to best support recruitment and retention moving forward.
- Rate studies are underway with DVHA Payment Reform and HireAbility look at provider staffing costs

- Designated Agency/Specialized Service Agency workforce workgroup - ongoing partnership between VDH and DMH to address workforce challenges among people working in SUD and MH
- Education and training opportunities funded by VDH-DSU that support the workforce and respond to emerging substance use trends.



Need to expand SUD education efforts for decision makers, other AHS departments, medical providers and the community at large. There are misunderstandings about SUD and the difficulties with addressing it.

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 4: Training, Education & Awareness](#))

What we're doing

- Efforts to better define and talk about what substance misuse prevention is and looks like in communities is underway.
- [Programs & Services](#) page includes DSU Annual Overview and Program Briefs
- [Data and Reports](#) page and [Substance Use Dashboard](#) present up-to-date substance use data that are specific to Vermont
- Funding to Vermont Judiciary to train judges on issues related to OUD and strategies to use in dockets statewide
- Funding to DAIL HireAbility to provide specialized employment services for individuals with OUD in Burlington, Newport, Rutland, Bennington



Workforce training needs to prioritize trauma informed care

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 4: Training, Education & Awareness](#))

What we're doing

- Hub and Spoke Learning Collaborative includes trauma informed care
- Recovery Coach Academy includes being a trauma informed recovery support
- 2026 WFD training planning is underway with our training coordination partner, [ADEPT Educational Institute of New England](#). Trauma informed care is a topic being considered.
- VDH supports scholarships for Vermont service providers to attend the New England School of Addiction and Prevention Studies and the Annual New England

School of Best Practices in Addiction Services – both of which provide learning opportunities related to trauma and trauma care provision.



Need to enhance training and social marketing efforts focused on legal substances (e.g., alcohol, cannabis)

(Maps to [DSU Strategic Plan Priority 4: Training, Education & Awareness](#))

What we're doing

- VDH collaborates with the Department of Liquor and Lottery, the Cannabis Control Board, the VDH Tobacco Control Program, the Vermont Department of Taxes, Attorney General's Office and AOE on issues related to nicotine, alcohol and cannabis.
- One Less campaign: [One Less | Vermont Department of Health](#)
- Let's Talk Cannabis: [Let's Talk Cannabis | Vermont Department of Health](#)