



To: Senate Committee on Health and Welfare
From: Sandy McGuire, CEO
Date: January 28, 2026
Subject: Howard Center | Mental Health Advocacy Day

Chair Lyons, Vice Chair Gulick, and members of the Senate Health and Welfare Committee — thank you for the opportunity to be here today, and especially for your attention on Mental Health Advocacy Day.

I want to begin with a story that was shared with me recently.

A parent reached out to reflect on several years when their child was experiencing a prolonged mental health crisis. During that time, the family interacted with hospitals, emergency departments, shelters, law enforcement, state agencies — and with the Howard Center.

Those years were exhausting and frightening. But today, that young person has been stable for more than three years. They are doing well, with strong supports in place.

The parent described their role during that time using an old Roman word — *benefactor*. Not just in the sense of financial help, but as someone who could advocate, persist, push systems to communicate, and stay engaged when things became overwhelming.

They also acknowledged something important: most people who come through our doors do not have that kind of advocate. They do not have family with time, resources, or influence to navigate multiple systems at once.

That difference — between having an advocate and being alone — is often the difference between stability and crisis.

Howard Center is the designated community mental health and developmental disability agency for Chittenden County and a preferred provider for substance use disorder services. Along with our peer Designated Agencies and Specialized Service Agencies across Vermont, we operate as part of a coordinated statewide network — Vermont Care Partners — ensuring that in every



region of the state, there is a provider responsible for delivering essential community-based services.

Designated Agencies deliver Medicaid entitlement services required under Vermont's State Plan, and we also provide additional mandated safety-net services that communities rely on every day.

We are not simply one provider among many. We are part of Vermont's public mental health, substance use, and developmental services infrastructure.

We are required to serve individuals regardless of complexity, acuity, risk, or ability to pay. When systems are strained, when needs are severe, and when options are limited, designated agencies do not get to opt out.

We work in close partnership with hospitals, schools, law enforcement, shelters, housing providers, and community organizations. That coordination is not incidental — it is core to the model.

At the Howard Center, that responsibility translates into real scale.

Each year, we serve more than 19,000 Vermonters across the lifespan — children, adults, families, and older adults.

We provide services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, because crises and essential services do not follow traditional business hours.

With more than 1,300 employees, the Howard Center is the fourth largest health care employer in Vermont. Our staff work across outpatient care, crisis response, residential services, and community supports — often behind the scenes, but essential to the functioning of our health care and public safety systems.

Our services include outpatient mental health and substance use treatment, emergency and crisis response, school-based and family supports, developmental disability services, and community-based housing and support programs.

What ties all of this together is continuity.



People rarely experience challenges in neat categories. Needs change. Crises emerge. Recovery and stability take time. Our role is to stay with people as those needs evolve — and to do so in the community whenever possible.

Over the past several years, the work has become both more urgent and more complex.

We are seeing higher acuity across the board, and particularly among children and youth. We are seeing increased co-occurring mental health and substance use needs and more people whose challenges are intertwined with housing instability, medical issues, and involvement with emergency systems.

As Vermont's population ages, we are increasingly supporting older adults experiencing depression, anxiety, cognitive decline, and the mental health impacts of isolation, loss, and medical complexity. These needs often intersect with housing, caregiving, and health care systems, requiring coordinated, community-based responses.

At the same time, workforce shortages and financial constraints make it increasingly difficult to meet demand at the level people deserve.

Despite this, our staff continue to show up — clinicians, crisis workers, case managers, residential staff, direct support professionals — doing work that is emotionally demanding, often under-recognized, and absolutely essential.

Much of what designated agencies do is the hardest work in the system.

We provide services that are high-risk, labor-intensive, and available around the clock. We serve people in crisis, people with the most complex needs, and people who have often been turned away elsewhere.

This work is among the most difficult and the least financially supported in our health care system— but communities cannot function without it. It is precisely this work that keeps people out of emergency departments, reduces involvement with law enforcement, stabilizes families, and supports community safety.

Howard Center has served this community for over one hundred sixty years. That history is not about preserving the past or standing still — it is about constant evolution.



Across generations, we have adapted to new clinical knowledge, new community needs, changing expectations, and increasingly tight fiscal environments.

Today, like many providers and like the State itself, we are facing difficult choices. Resources are finite. Needs are growing. Trade-offs are real.

We have had to make difficult decisions. In some areas, that has meant reducing or ending programs that were no longer sustainable. At the same time, we have continued to evolve to meet emerging needs — partnering and leading new initiatives such as Mental Health Urgent Care, a Recovery Shelter, and a specialized program for military members and veterans. These efforts reflect our commitment to adapt — even in constrained environments — in service of community need.

Our responsibility is to steward the resources entrusted to us in service of our mission, making careful, often difficult decisions so that, within the resources available, we achieve the greatest possible impact for the communities we serve.

Mental Health Advocacy Day matters because the decisions made in this room are not abstract.

They shape whether Vermonters receive help early — or only once they reach crisis.

They determine whether families must act as full-time system navigators — or whether care is accessible and coordinated.

They determine whether Designated Agencies can continue to meet their mandated responsibilities safely, sustainably, and effectively.

Mental health, substance use disorder treatment, and developmental services are not separate from health care. They are foundational to it.

As you continue your work this session, we respectfully ask that you:

- Support stable and adequate funding for community mental health, substance use disorder, and developmental disability services, so access does not depend on crisis status or geography.
- Invest in the workforce through recruitment, retention, and competitive compensation.
- Strengthen prevention and early intervention, especially for children and families, and older adults.



- And continue building alternatives to emergency departments for mental health crises.

These investments do more than improve individual outcomes. They strengthen families, reduce strain on other systems, and support healthier communities across Vermont.

I want to close by returning to that parent who reached out.

They expressed deep gratitude for the people who showed up during their family's hardest years — often quietly, often behind the scenes, and often under extraordinary pressure.

That is the work of Designated and Specialized Services Agencies.

It is complex. It is challenging. And it is essential.

We are proud to do this work on behalf of Vermont, and we are grateful for your partnership in ensuring that when people reach out for help, there is a system ready to meet them.