

# Vermont Developmental Services: Mental Health Advocacy Day

House Human Services Committee

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Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you about the Vermont Developmental Disabilities System (DDS). I am Beth Sigtler, the executive director of Champlain Community Services, a Specialized Service Agency in Colchester, Vermont, and the President of Vermont Care Network – part of the Vermont Care Partners – a partnership of the 16 designated and specialized mental health, developmental services and substance use provider agencies. I've worked in the field of Developmental Services for 25 years.

Thank you for the **Workforce Investment** last year. At CCS we were able to raise our Direct Support Professionals wage from \$12.35/hour to \$14.35/hour, and as a result our turnover rate has decreased from 35 percent to 22 percent. This is still a troubling turnover rate, but it's improved.

I was asked to talk a little about developmental services and what the impact is on Vermonters. The range of what we do is extraordinary. The Vermont Developmental Disabilities Services agencies truly support the Vermont's *most* vulnerable citizens. They are vulnerable essentially by definition through their clinical and financial status. Most people who come into services are in crisis – medically, residentially or financially. People with intellectual disabilities and autism need our services to keep them in safe homes, medically stable, financially secure and combat **food insecurity**. We also help to moderate their risk of **abuse, neglect, and exploitation**. The recent National Public Radio series discovered a **700 percent higher incidence sexual assault** in people with intellectual disabilities and autism – but to be honest, in my experience it's even higher. The Vermont Developmental Services system keeps vulnerable people safe and healthy.

We don't simply prevent bad things from happening – some of the most important we do is supporting people's development into contributing citizens, taxpayers, employers, advocates, employees, business owners, and community members. We reduce dependence on entitlements, use of law enforcement, hospitalization and homelessness. We support people in developing a sense of self-worth. Also, Developmental Services has a unique role in Healthcare reform. Our work shows that caring for the whole person reduces health care expenses and improves their health and social capital.

We support a wide range of people that span across cultures and belief systems, difficult abuse histories, different economic backgrounds, medical needs, psychiatric issues, substance use disorders, and different skills, health, residential and vocational needs. That's why services need to be person-centered. We talk about measuring our supports and our work - and we can measure a lot of what we do – employment (47 percent average, 75 percent at CCS), housing (48 percent in residential supports), we reduce dependence on Social Security (\$1.7 Million), people in Developmental services earned \$4,357,770 in wages, with a potential tax contribution of \$666,739 (DAIL DDS Annual Report, 2016), often the work we do is immeasurable and the dexterity of our skills is unseen. But the impact isn't.

SSA/DA's are Designated by the State of Vermont to deliver community-based services in accordance with extremely complex funding and regulations. We've closed expensive institutions and worked with the community to embrace diversity. While we're doing incredible work in Vermont - we're also being looked at nationally and internationally as leaders for our work on integration and supported employment programs. Within the past year Vermont Delegations presented in Vienna, Austria and Berlin, Germany about Vermont's supported employment programs – and, Vermont was given a prestigious award in Vienna from the Zero Project, acknowledging the work we're doing.

As you know the Governor's FY'19 budget recommends a 2 percent (\$4.3 Million) cut to Developmental Services. DS has been cut frequently in the past 10 years. Further reducing the budget means that we can't deliver critical services and eliminates the Workforce Investment of last year. Specifically, at CCS a two percent reduction means a cut of \$100,000, or \$1,500 per person which equates to: 10 hours of psychiatric support, or eight 24-hour days of respite support, or 50 hours of vocational support – or cutting two service coordinators when caseloads are already too high. In fact, a larger investment in our services is necessary to stabilize the system. Imagine vulnerable Vermonters who lose their homes because they can't keep respite, or who lose their voice because they can't communicate. They may lose jobs, can't follow-up on needed medical care and can't access essential nursing or psychiatric supports. While I understand that the budget is a balancing act every year, this population cannot be put at risk anymore.

When “Kat” entered services, she was being sexually abused by her mother and brother and faced debilitating anxiety. With help from her service coordinator she moved into a stable home. She was assigned a state guardian to help with decisions and with the help of our supported employment program she explored several jobs. The CCS Way2Work program found the right employment and now Kat works independently, takes the bus to work, and has obtained her own guardianship. She is in a good relationship and is working over 25 hours per week. She is healthy, happy and stable and contributing to her community.

“Jacob” also came to the agency in crisis. He and his girlfriend were volatile, he was unemployed, his utilities were in jeopardy of being shut off and he owed child support. He had been frequently fired, could not find stable work and he and his girlfriend had regular contact with the police for domestic disturbances. Jacob is an engaging, funny, and kind man. With hard work from his service coordinator and collaboration with other providers and our supported employment team he has stabilized in two jobs working 40 hours/week, he and his girlfriend are in counseling and their finances are supported through the agency's Representative Payee program. Home supports help he and his girlfriend pay bills and obtain healthy food. Also, with help from Burlington Housing he has saved over \$15,000 in an escrow account to purchase a home – which he is actively pursuing. Additionally, Jacob is a contributing member on two community non-profit boards where his insight into the challenges of having an intellectual disability brings great insight into those around him.

The work we're doing in Vermont Developmental Services doing is critical to keeping vulnerable people safe, productive and happy. Thank you for the continued support and investment in our system.

Respectfully Submitted,

Elizabeth M. Sightler