

**State of Vermont**

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Agency of Human Services

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To: Joint Fiscal Committee
From: Emily Hawes, Commissioner
Re: Proposal for Workforce Investment for Fiscal Year 2024
Date: September 27, 2023

DocuSigned by: 9/22/2023

Emily Hawes

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Fiscal Year 2024 Appropriation

Pursuant to Act 78 of 2023, Sec. B.1101(d)(4): *In fiscal year 2024, the amount of \$3,000,000 is appropriated from the General Fund to the Department of Mental Health to address workforce needs at the designated and specialized service agencies. These funds shall not be released until a plan to meet training and retention is mutually agreed upon by the Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living and the designated and specialized service agencies and approved by the General Assembly or the Joint Fiscal Committee if the legislature is not in session. All or a portion of these funds may be used as matching funds to the Agency of Human Services Global Commitment program to provide State match if any part of the plan is eligible to draw federal funds. It is the intent of the General Assembly to maximize the value of this one-time funding through eligible Global Commitment investment.*

Proposal Overview

The Department of Mental Health would like to expand the existing Vermont Care Partners Employee Investment Program to all Designated and Specialized Service Agency (DA/SSA, or agency/agencies hereafter) staff with Vermont Care Partners (VCP) serving as the administrator of the program. DMH would issue a grant to VCP for its administration of the program without any administrative fee. All funds would be utilized for staff as tuition reimbursement and/or loan repayment and would be maintained in a centralized pool (see details of proposal below). Reports on utilization, expenditures and outcomes will be made by VCP to DMH on a quarterly basis. DMH will be prepared to report on outcomes with Vermont Care Partners to the committees of jurisdiction during the 2024 session if requested. The general fund appropriation of \$3M would be used as matching funds for a total gross GC Investment amount of \$6.9M.

Proposed DMH Program Specifications**Employee Eligibility**

Statewide program eligible types of awards, and awardees in accordance with legislative intent are:

- Tuition assistance for individuals pursuing degrees to become bachelor's-level direct services staff and master's-level clinicians and nurses.
- Loan repayment for bachelor's-level direct service staff and master's-level clinicians and nurses.
- Applicants/Employees would be required to pursue, or to have previously pursued, a degree relevant to current or future job responsibilities. These funds would not be awarded for expenses related to conferences, trainings, academic supplies, or other expenses, including fees. Employees would become eligible for the program upon



meeting their agency's benefits eligibility requirements, completion of their agency's introduction/probationary period, and that they remain in good standing throughout the course of the agreement.

- Awardees would have to complete six months or a one-year service obligation (program dependent) to provide MH, SUD, or developmental disability services at their awarding DA/SSA in Vermont, and to successfully complete coursework to qualify for forgiveness.

Employee Application Process

Applications would be accepted on a rolling basis. Each applicant would be required to complete the applicable standard VCP Education Investment Program application and receive their Program or Division Director's approval to submit the application to the Human Resources Department of their respective agency. Applicants could apply one time within a 12-month period for tuition assistance and/or loan repayment.

Tuition Assistance

An approved tuition assistance application would result in a service obligation contract between the agency and the employee, and a promissory note agreeing to pay back awards if service obligation is unmet. The agency would pay the tuition directly to the educational institution. Should the employee not complete or pass the course, the employee would be responsible for repaying the agency in accordance with the promissory note.

Loan Repayment

In the case of loan repayment, the employee would be required to present proof of an existing loan expense to receive payment. Payments would be made directly to the loan service provider. The employee would be required to sign a service obligation contract agreeing to the terms of the program.

Both tuition assistance and loan repayment awards would be treated as interest free loans if the employee were unable to fulfill the service obligation of six months or one-year employment commitment (program dependent), in accordance with a signed agreement and promissory note.

Distribution of Funds

Vermont Care Partner would inform each eligible DA/SSA of its proposed allocation of EIP one-time funds. Proposed amounts would be based on a given agency's proportion of mental health, substance use disorder treatment program staff, and developmental disability staff. The proposed amount of individual employee awards is in compliance with Sec. 127(c) of the IRS code on educational assistance. Each agency would set its priority for distribution of funds based on programmatic staffing needs and other unique circumstances.

On a quarterly basis agencies would submit reports of payments made to employees and document the payments and associated promissory notes. VCP would then invoice DMH.

VCP and DMH recommends these new funds be maintained in a central pool and agencies would be allocated their share at varied rates. A centralized pool managed by VCP would allow staff across all agencies to have equitable access to the resource.