

Testimony for Public Hearing

Vermont Joint Fiscal Committee

August 12, 2014

~'~

Elizabeth Mead Sightler

123 N. Winooski Ave,

Burlington, VT 05401

Re: FY'15 Budget Rescission

Good Afternoon Joint Fiscal Committee Members, my name is Elizabeth Sightler, I am the executive director of Champlain Community Services (CCS), a Specialized Service Agency in **Chittenden County** serving individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. As such, we are partners with the State of Vermont, responsible for providing a lifetime of “whole-person” supports to citizens with complex needs.

I am here today to ask you not to eliminate the small amount of new funding to developmental services this year. We have had budget rescissions in 2009, 2011, 2012 and last year, 2014, even as our responsibilities increase and regulations become more complex. Funding decreases negatively impact those we serve, cost us qualified staff, unsettle lives which are often undervalued, and end up costing more money to recruit, hire, and train new staff. The increase to our Medicaid rate and needed one-time dollars are essential to our collective success.

CCS had a **35% turnover rate last year** - and, **85% of the people who left said they didn't want to** - but needed to for economic reasons. My advertising budget is up 40% from last year, our managers spend much of their time recruiting, hiring and training. **We are already facing a hiring crisis.** Our agency serves 66 people, with 55 positions for staff – **currently we have 9 staff vacancies.** I have worked in the developmental services field for 21 years, and it's never been harder to maintain staff.

Our commitment to providing comprehensive and economical services is as strong as ever. For over 47 years CCS has served people with complex developmental, physical, psychiatric issues *for their entire lives. Our specialty is finding sustainable employment for our clients.* **In a fiscal climate that includes budget reductions, and outside factors like higher-paying options (in lower-stress jobs), and a very low unemployment rates (2.6 percent in May) we struggle to afford to hire – and more importantly retain – staff qualified to do this important work.** *It's ironic that an agency that specializes in finding employment for the people we serve can't also provide stable employment to our staff.*

While small, we welcomed the Governor's proposed budget increase of 1.6 percent. It allowed my agency to increase the hourly rate to our front-line staff to **\$11.75/hour.** At full-time that's just *under* \$25,000/year - before taxes. This is less than the City of Burlington pays under its minimum livable wage ordinance and, comparatively, far below the Burlington para-educators contracted Step 1 starting wage of \$14.80 (which has had 3% increases over each of the past 3 years)

([http://bsdweb.bsdrv.org/district/Human Resources/BEA%20Paraeducators%202011-2014.pdf](http://bsdweb.bsdrv.org/district/Human_Resources/BEA%20Paraeducators%202011-2014.pdf)). CCS, and other developmental services agencies, support a vulnerable population, one which is frequently victimized by exploitation and abuse, and maintaining a vigorous workforce is essential.

Examples:

- We serve a challenging woman with severe developmental and psychiatric challenges who has recently graduated from high school. In order to keep both her and the community safe, she must be staffed with two people. **At the rate we can afford to pay, we can't find staff to work with her to stabilize her day supports.** Her service coordinator must provide coverage (in addition to his/her other responsibilities), or her home provider must keep her home. That service coordinator's caseload of 12 other complex, high-needs individuals also needs support, and home provider need time away to prevent burnout.
- We had a strong, seasoned staff person who worked with us for three years learning a complicated communication system for a man with autism. She helped him to move beyond the death of both of his parents, find a new home, and begin intentionally communicating with the world outside. She loved working with him and we made a strong investment to train her extensively to increase their communication rapport. She left to be the night manager of a coffee chain - which is GREAT work if you want to be a night manager - but *she wanted to be a communication specialist* and to keep working with us. *She wanted to, but she couldn't.*

While the Vermont community is evolving to embrace the lives of people with disabilities, we are still not adequately providing this health sector with real ways to "join the world". I am hopeful that the leaders in Vermont are invested in supporting **all Vermonters of all abilities, and I hope you'll support our work.** *I welcome any of you to come to our agency and meet the terrific people we all support.* I am available to answer any questions you have. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Sightler
802.233.1871