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Sent: Thursday, April 7, 2022 5:59 PM

To: Martha J Kitchel <janek45@hotmail.com>; msirotkin@leg.state.vt.us; Virginia Lyons <VLyons@leg.state.vt.us>

Subject: Request for Tuition Assistance and Loan Repayment

Dear Senator Lyons, Senator Sirotkin, and Senator Kitchel

As you well know, the mental health needs of Vermonters including those with disabilities has never been greater. We have seen increases in acuity, as well as greater numbers of children, youth and adults seeking our services. At the same time our workforce challenges have worsened (currently at a 20% vacancy rate) to the point of jeopardizing the health and safety of the 36,000 Vermonters who are our clients and the thousands of other Vermonters who never officially become clients but benefit from crisis services and other community supports.

Vermont Care Partners strongly recommends that the Senate Health and Welfare, Appropriations and Economic Development Committees consider the recommendation the original recommendation of the Health Care Committee to invest \$6 million in one-time funds for tuition assistance and loan repayment inclusive for all DA/SSA staff. The newly developed program is extremely popular and will be used up quickly. It would be greatly beneficial to our workforce development effort to be able to provider higher awards and to extend the program all employees. Nowhere is our staffing shortage more acute than the I/DD staff, but currently, these staff are ineligible to receive tuition assistance and loan repayment because of the limited scope of Tobacco Settlement (the original source of funds).

Vermont Care Partners has developed the infrastructure to responsibly manage the current tuition assistance and loan repayment funds. It would be a shame to see the program run out of funds in less than a year, but that's where we are heading. We haven't spent the appropriation of \$1.5 million yet because we just got the grant in October and were required to set up forms and processes similar to VSAC, including instruments like promissory notes. We did this with no administrative funding, just agency HR Directors working with VCP and some volunteer guidance from VSAC. It took a little time for us to launch it, but after all that work of setting up the programs, the funds will be gone in about a year. While this funding was not included in the Governor's budget, it is our understanding that, conceptually, there is support for it by state government.

We believe that extending and expanding this program could make a big difference to the staff who are struggling to make ends meet and will give them the opportunity to advance their education while continuing their commitment to and employment at DA/SSAs.

Thank you for considering this request. We would be pleased to provide further information and/or testimony.

Thanks,

Julie

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