

opinion

MY TURN

Budget that's penny wise, pound foolish

BOB BICK

The women and men in the state administration and Legislature are smart, thoughtful and well-informed. They are aware of the economic and programmatic realities and challenges that face community service providers. They have been educated about the growing array of unmet needs of Vermonters waiting to access services. They are aware of the difficult choices agencies face as they strive to balance underfunded budgets while continuing to serve the needs of the state's most vulnerable and least resourced populations.

With so many competing demands, the administration and Legislature's responsibility to sufficiently fund the agencies that provide the programs that our state relies on is indeed an arduous job. But nonetheless, it is their job and many lives depend on it.

While other health care entities face their own challenges cost shifting between public and private revenue sources, the Designated and Specialized Service Agencies system is almost singularly dependent on state and federal funding. While other parts of the health care system are told to grow at about 3 percent per year, we are told to be more efficient, do more with less, and continue with minimal or no annual funding increases.

After years of under-funding and increasing and increasingly complex de-



Howard Center on South Winooski Avenue in Burlington.

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mands on key community services providers we have truly reached our tipping point. The state must realize that asking community agencies to provide health care and social service programs on the state's behalf demands a more sustainable and honest funding plan that is no less equitable than funding considerations for hospitals and state employees.

The Green Mountain Care Board's recent independent financial review and analysis of our agency's budget reported that:

"Howard Center's current budget does not adequately fund the institution's desire to accomplish its client service missions...Despite its responsible budgeting practices, as presently funded the agency struggles mightily to recruit and retain the staff it needs so it can meet its programmatic and statutory mission. In spite of those challenges, it is equally clear to us that Howard Center provides great value to the community through the dedica-

tion and skill of its staff and management."

The administration's current FY'17 budget proposal fails to meet the most basic funding needs for staff and operational costs necessary for a sustainable business platform.

The services we provide rely on well-trained, experienced, committed staff and the sustained relationships they form with those who entrust us with their care. And yet, across the state the rate of turnover in our system averages 27 percent. It is simply not possible for us to meet the demands of the state and the needs of our clients and communities when over a quarter of our staff leave every year, primarily due to inadequate compensation. Economic viability is necessary to permit programs to attract and retain the experienced and motivated staff to provide the treatment and supports our clients need to reduce unnecessary personal and family suffering while simultaneously de-

creasing and often preventing the need for future and higher cost services.

In the absence of a responsible and consistent funding allocation plan, how many of the 819 individuals receiving developmental services support from Howard Center will have their supports reduced? How many of our 709 clients with severe and persistent mental illness will be required to again transition to a new case manager or experience a reduction in other community supports they require contributing to costly hospitalizations or worse? At a time when Vermont is struggling with what is universally described as an opiate abuse epidemic, how many of the 1,500-plus individuals supported by our Safe Recovery program – responsible for over 500 overdose reversals – will no longer have life-saving care management and harm reduction?

The failure of the state's administration and Legislature to address the economic needs of Designated and Specialized Service Agencies that provide life-supporting and life-saving services to individuals and families on behalf of the state is a failure to understand the financial consequences that will undermine our statewide agenda to create affordable healthcare. More importantly, it is a failure to appreciate the profound cost to the well-being of our communities one person, one child, one family at a time.

Bob Bick, of Shelburne, is the chief executive officer of Howard Center.