

VT Care Partners – Legislative Advocacy – 01-10-2022

Captioned By: White Coat Captioning

>> JULIE TESSLER: Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us for the Legislative Advocacy Webinar. I'm going to give it a minute or two to make sure everyone gets on. My name's Julie Tessler. I work at Vermont Care Partners. We have interpreters Sabrina and Elizabeth supporting this webinar today. All right. Let's back up.

>> INTERPRETER: FYI, this is Elizabeth. Laura Siegel is in the chat saying, "I don't see the interpreters." Only when you speak. Interesting. So, both interpreters are spotlit, and the presenter is spotlit, so we're not sure why you can't see all.

>> JULIE TESSLER: Okay. We're just gonna pause and we'll start the webinar in just a minute or two when Marie feels we're where we need to be.

>> MARIE LALLIER: I don't know --

>> JULIE TESSLER: Okay. If you're just joining us, this is the Legislative Advocacy Webinar put on by Vermont Care Partners. We're just pausing for a moment to address some technical difficulties.

Are we good to go?

>> INTERPRETER: Marie, could you spotlight just me, the interpreter, to see if that helps?

So, Marie, do you want me to try to spotlight everyone again and see if that works?

>> JULIE TESSLER: So, I can see all four people. I'm not sure I understand what the problem is.

>> INTERPRETER: For me, the view is just Elizabeth now. Oh, and there I am.

>> MARIE LALLIER: Okay. So, I have it now just Elizabeth pinned. Which removed the spotlight for everyone else.

>> JULIE TESSLER: Okay.

>> MARIE LALLIER: So -- and when we had them -- everyone spotlighted, I think Laura said they were moving, so let me try again.

>> INTERPRETER: FYI, I just spot lit myself, Laura and Julie.

>> JULIE TESSLER: Are we ready to start? Thank you for all who waited for us to work through some technical challenges. Hopefully everyone has a good view. We really appreciate this year we do have American Sign Language interpreters, so thank you for joining us and making this more accessible. The goal today is to give everyone some tools about -- to do legislative advocacy. And I think it can feel a little daunting at first, and I just want to start with this quote from Margaret Meade, never doubt a small group can change the world. In fact, it's the only thing that ever has. So, don't think that you're not enough or you and your companions aren't enough, the people you work with, the people you serve. We really can do a lot more than you might imagine. So, and today, what I want to do is give you the tools to do that, to kind of give the overview of the political process, some pointers on using the legislative website, talk about a few skills for communicating with legislators, and then just giving you some information in case you don't already have it on Mental Health Advocacy Day and our legislative agenda.

So, starting at the easy part, it gets harder after this first slide. I think most people know that State government has three branches, just like the Federal Government, the Executive, the Legislative, and the Judicial. The executive branch consists of the Governor and state agencies. Its responsibility is to enact and enforce the laws. The Secretary of the Agency of Human Services works for the Governor, and below them in the Commissioner of the Department Of Aging and Independent Living and the Department of Mental Health. They both work under the secretary. The legislature is composed of two chambers, the House of Representatives and the Senate. 50 Senators and 130 members. The legislature

creates the laws including the one that sets the annual budget. And the Governor -- but it's an interactive process. Each year the Governor submits a budget proposal. It goes to the House.

The House will have public hearings and take testimony and listen to the perspectives. They pass it and it goes to the Senate. We'll talk a little bit more about that. This is how a bill becomes a law. This is actually not my slide. It comes from the legislative website itself. So, let's say you want to have something happen. Maybe it's about bicycle safety. So, what you need to do if you want to see a law -- to create a law yourself, is you have to find a legislator who is willing to sponsor it. The legislature then would work with you on what you want and work with legislative counsel to develop language to write up a bill. If the legislature -- legislator is a representer from the House, it becomes a House bill and gets a House number, H-something, H-1, H-2. Goes in order. If they're a Senator, it would become a Senate bill. Sometimes, there are folk who want the same thing, and both Representatives and Senators want to introduce the bill, so they'll have the same bills submitted to both the House and the Senate. And it gets through it somehow. When the bill is ready to go, it goes to the full House or Senate and it's read for the first time, so it's introduced to everyone.

Then that chamber, the House or Senate, will decide which committees should study this bill. You can't do it with, you know, the 180 people. So, maybe it will go to -- if it's a mental health bill, it would go to the Healthcare Committee in the House or if it's a developmental disability-related bill, it would go to the House Human Services Committee. Sometimes bills go to more than one committee because it has overlapping topics. Maybe it's Judiciary and mental health. In that case, committees look at it. Well, the committees get lots of bills and they literally, when we're there, take the bills and tack them on the wall, and then they have to decide what are their priorities and what do they want to get done this session. They actually work with the legislative leadership around priorities. It's not just the committee that makes the decision alone. They never can get through all the bills that come to their committee.

So, they pick a bill. They pick your bicycle bill or whatever. And they study it. They ask for testimony from State government. From interested parties. Sometimes national experts. So, they take testimony, they may say, you know what? If we do this action, it's gonna cost the State money, and then they could have the Joint Fiscal Office actually figure out how much it would cost. They'd get an estimate of the cost. But once they spent time on it, usually they end up not accepting the bill just as written. Once they're studying it, they decide to change language and details, they add findings of things they researched and they create a -- they update the bill, and when they're ready for it to go back to the chamber, it's read for a second time. This new, improved bill.

The second meeting could then lead to some legislators in the audience who weren't at the committee to say, you know what, I don't like that part of it. I want to amend it. They may come up with amendments. Now, the committee can say, oh, that's a good idea. Take the bill back and amend the bill based on those recommendations. Or they can say, we're done, we don't want to accept your amendment and then it can be amended on the floor. So, after it goes to that amendment process and they get the amendments are either approved or turned down, there is then a third reading. So, between the second reading and the third reading, the full chamber, whether House or Senate, really has time to have a broader dialogue about the bill.

Then, after one chamber finishes it, the whole process starts again in the next chamber. It goes -- gets read for the first time. It gets referred to committee. It gets adjusted. It goes back to the full chamber. So, let's say we started in the House with a bill, they pass a bill, it goes to the Senate, the Senate changes the bill. Well, then the House has an opportunity to approve the bill as changed by the Senate or they can say, nope, we don't agree. And in that case, a Committee of Conference is formed. It usually has three Senators and Three Representatives. They sit down together and iron out their differences. Once they have, it goes back to each chamber to approve the final bill, and then the bill goes to the Governor for the Governor's signature to become law.

The Governor can choose to veto the bill. In which case, it would take 2/3 of a vote of both the House and the Senate to override the veto. Or they could pass the bill and then it becomes an act. So, that's the process. It's a little complicated and a little chaotic, but it works, generally.

And if you want to follow all this, you can go to the legislative website. So, it's either legislature.vermont.gov or you can do Vermont General Assembly. It will get you to this page that looks kind of like this. And I'm gonna take a minute to just give you some highlights of that page. If you want -- if you know the policy or the bill you want to follow is in a specific committee, you can click on "committees," and then on that specific committee you'll find an agenda for the week. You'll find documents of what people have brought who have testified. You can find a list of who testified, both past and for the current week. And there's a staff person for each committee, and you can find the contact information for that staff person and for all the legislators.

Maybe you don't know who the chairperson is. That information will be on the committee page. You also might want to reach out to your own legislator. So, then you can click on where it says "legislator."

Maybe you don't know who your legislator is. So you can actually look them up by district. Or you think you know their name. You've checked their name and find out what district they're in. And it will have their contact information as well. It's very helpful to have that. If you want to find where a bill is at, you really don't know which house it went to or which committee or whether the committee did anything, is it in the second reading, the third reading? You click on "bill or resolution," and if you know the bill number, that works great. If you only know the topic, so, maybe the topic is bicycles, maybe it's appropriations. I often do not remember the numbers of bills, but I can look them up this way and it's very helpful.

Whoops, I didn't see that. I went backwards. There's also a place where you can click for House and Senate. So, what's going on in the House? They call their agenda a calendar. So, they put the calendar for the day, and that tells you what they're working on that day. There's also journals. The journals are what happened. So, that's kind of like their minutes of what happened. And sometimes you'll want to know who voted for something or not for something. When votes are important, they often actually list the names of who voted for or against, but sometimes they just do it by voice vote, if it's an obvious bill that's gonna pass or not pass.

So, how do you do the advocacy work? How do you determine what legislators to connect with? Maybe it's not a particular bill. Maybe you just want them to know the amount of stress that our workforce is under or how frustrated you are that you can't get your child the services that they need. So, you find out what committee affects you, the topic you're interested in. You can also say I want my legislator to know what's going on and then figure out who represents your district. Before you reach out to them, I recommend that when you look up their name and read their biographies that are on the website, you never know when information you're gonna find that it's really helpful if you can find some connections. Do they go to your church? Do they -- what kind of work do they do? Do they understand our issues? You'll even find out about where they were educated and about their families. So, I found out that one of the legislators went to my high school in New York state. Never would have known it otherwise if I hadn't read her biography. It's a nice thing to connect about.

Once you kind of find out who they are and decided who you want to talk to, you can either email or call them. That information, again, is on the website. When we're not in COVID and the House is open, the Statehouse is open, you can also leave a message with the Sergeant-At-Arms. What I recommend is you arrange to meet with them. Sorry, I keep touching my -- you can do that locally. You don't have to come into Montpelier when they come back. They don't -- they're not in session on Mondays. They're not in session on weekends and evenings. And it's their job to meet with you. Don't feel like you're imposing on them. You're not. This is -- they generally love people. They want to make sure they're doing a good job representing their constituents. So, it's a great opportunity to meet with them, even if you feel like you don't have a lot to say, probably have more to say than you think.

The Statehouse, when we're not in COVID, is always open to the public. I just want to emphasize that. It's also called the People's House. So, when you first walk in, it can be a little overwhelming because there's lots of people all over the place. Ask for the Sergeant-At-Arms. It's located by the front doors and they will help you with anything. Whether it's a question about parking, where to find your legislator, how do you get to the cafeteria, what's the schedule at -- did you forget to look for the House calendar? They have all the information you'd ever need. And they're very nice people. Sometimes, I leave my computer with them because I don't want to leave it in the coat room. If I want to take a walk. And they're like, sure, leave it here. They're really great.

As I said, it is somewhat chaotic, the work is happening in all different places, both in the House and Senate chambers, in the committee rooms, but also in a lot of informal conversations in the hallway and cafeteria. And so that's often where you would arrange to meet with your legislator if you wanted to come in. You can enter the committee rooms, any committee room at any time. You just walk in the door. And I don't know if COVID is gonna change that. You can also enter the House and Senate chambers any time except when they're doing formal roll call votes. And there's staff at the doors that will let you know if they're doing a formal roll call. When you go in the Senate, you're not allowed to bring your -- you're not allowed to have your cell phone on, for some reason, I'm not quite sure why. Both of the chambers are really beautiful and there's a balcony and seating along the sides. So you can just watch and see what's going on.

So, once you kind of figure out who you want to talk to, you should do a little planning about what you want to say. Legislators really wanted to hear your story and hear about your experiences. And so share where you're coming from. Ask for what you want and explain why. It helps to be informed about the topics, and you can do that by reading our legislative updates and seeing our agenda. You can form your own opinions that are totally different. That's fine. If your agency or organization has fact sheets, those are helpful to bring along. And just some basic information.

All right. I'm stuck. There we go. Remember that the legislators are people just like you. I tend to be a shy person. At least I used to be. Realize that they have been affected by mental health conditions, developmental disabilities, substance use disorders, either in their own lives or in the lives of people they care about. What we care about, they care about, and they like -- they do this job because they want to represent you. No one is expecting a highly polished presentation, but they really respond when people speak their truth from their heart. It just makes a big difference. Do try to avoid jargon. You know, whenever you're in a field, you end up speaking a different language. So, try to avoid it. Also, acronyms are overwhelming, confuse, because they're working on lots of different topics. So, try to avoid that. Also, know that the legislators usually are just -- they have 10 million balls in the air and they're running around doing a million things. So, when they carve out time for you, ask them how much time they carved out.

Sometimes, especially if you meet with them on a Monday, they'll probably have a little more time, but during the session, even if it's lunchtime, they may have made five different lunchtime appointments and have ten things they want to get done. So, ask them up front and then you'll know how much time you have to meet with them. When you are meeting with them and they ask a question you don't know, which happens all the time, just say you'll follow up. If you're unsure, don't, you know, don't fake it. Really -- and even it's kind of an advantage to have an opportunity to provide follow-up information because it keeps your dialogue going. Sometimes a legislator will say things that you don't agree with or you even find offensive. My initial response usually is -- I just want to argue back, but I have to remember to say -- acknowledge where they're coming from. Say, I hear you. There's another way to look at it. Good point. But, you know, consider this information, too. Help them by acknowledging their opinion but also give them an opportunity to change their mind in a comfortable way.

Remember to thank them. It's a good idea to offer to be a resource. Let them know that you'll call them back. That -- make the handshake. Make connections. Think about it as you're investing in a relationship. You never know -- even if your intent was only to talk to them once about one topic -- you may want to follow up and you want them to feel like you're there for them. It's really helpful to send an email or an actual piece of paper thank you note. And believe me, I literally find pretty cards, and sometimes I send a card to a whole committee to thank them when they worked really hard on an issue, and they pass those cards around round. They'll stay on the table for weeks. They want to be thanked. They're working really hard and they appreciate when you say "thank you."

If you're a forgetful person, you might even want to bring the card with you when you go to the Statehouse and just write it out and leave it with the Sergeant-At-Arms to give to them before you leave the building so you don't have to think about it again. So, we do have this great opportunity to hear from State leaders, to share our stories, and to particularly hear a keynote address from Senate President Pro Tem Becca Balint. Mental Health Advocacy Day has grown to be an important event in our state. Last year, we had nearly 300 people participate in our virtual event. We expect to hear from the Commissioner of Mental Health, we will also hear from the Speaker of the House, Jill Krowinski. Last year, Becca Balint, we asked her to speak briefly and were pretty much amazed what she had to say. She is the expert at speaking from the heart and she has experienced mental health challenges in her life that she is open about talking about. The challenges that her family has had. And what she wants to do.

So, we're very much looking forward to having Becca Balint be our Keynote Speaker, and we will have time for questions and discussion. So, it's a really great opportunity because you don't always get to have a dialogue with the Senate President. We will recognize two people have been outstanding advocates, and these are basically lifetime awards, but we'll keep that short. And then one of the best parts of the day is having people share their stories. It is something we ask people to sign up for in advance, but you can do it either live or you can do preordered. It gives you a sense of what people are experiencing in our communities. It's not -- it's people who are experiencing mental health conditions, developmental disabilities, substance use disorders, but also for the people working in the field, for the staff and the experience of staff to speak about their experiences.

So, I've always learned a lot from it. People are really wonderful storytellers. The stories are brief, but I think they're to the point and very meaningful. Just to briefly give you an update on the top priorities for Vermont Care Partners. The legislature started last week, on Tuesday, and it has moved very quickly. There are a lot of resources available to adjust the budget for this current fiscal year that runs from July to June. The administration has requested money for workforce development and to support recruitment and retention. However, we don't think the magnitude of their funding request is high enough. So, nor do the other home and community-based service providers. We know the level of stress that our workforce is under. System-wide, the mental health system, including developmental disabilities and substance use disorder services provided by designated and specialized service agencies has a vacancy rate of 20%, but that doesn't reflect that -- in some programs, it's much higher, particularly developmental disabilities direct service providers.

Some of those vacancy rates have been as high as 50% to 60%. So, if you're staff, I'm not telling you anything you don't know. Folx, staff are working super hard, some over 100 hours a week, to fill in and meet people's needs. It's been a heroic effort, but it's been going on and on and people are exhausted. And the least we can do is provide financial support, significant financial support. So, that's our goal. It's also our goal to improve recruitment so that the staff are not stretched so thin and that we are better able to provide the services people need. Because right now, we're not meeting the needs as fully as we should and want to and people need.

Once the Budget Adjustment Act moves forward, and it's gonna move from the House pretty quickly into the Senate, then the Governor will present the Fiscal Year '23 Budget Act. That is for funding services starting July 1 of this year. In that act, we were looking for long-term supports. We want to see

no one working and designated in specialized service agencies earning less than \$20 an hour, and we want everyone to be paid at a fair amount. So, if you're a master's-level clinician, chances are you can go elsewhere and earn \$20,000 more a year. We don't think that's right. We want people to stay and be able to have a decent life and be fully paid for the work that they do. So, our goal is to achieve significant increase in Medicaid rates so that we can provide better compensation for the staff. And we want that to also establish a predictable rate schedule that just like State employees, healthcare, education, that you can expect to get a pay raise each year, which right now is -- it does not happen and the administration has not been providing significant increases or requests for increases for our rates. So, we're quite far behind, but we have a lot of legislators understanding the need to increase that. So, that's our goal.

We also hope to expand tuition assistance, scholarships, and loan repayment. We have a little money for that right now. And we haven't been able to provide that for people in our developmental disability program, so we want to be able to do that. There is a healthcare workforce strategic plan. And we are supportive of those recommendations and those policy recommendations are also working their way through the legislature.

And finally, we hope to explore certified community behavioral health clinics, which could be a different way of funding our services and bring in Federal resources. And that process has already started. We're working with the Department of Mental Health and the National Council. So, that's our most critical issues, but we have quite a full legislative agenda that you can see on our website. So, there's our website. Vermontcarepartners.org. You can see our agenda. You can get information. Every week, we'll have new updates on it. You can also contact me if you want to receive those updates by mail. And you can also contact members of the Vermont Care Partners Policy Team. Dylan Burns is our Director of Mental Health Services and Marie Lallier. They are the experts. I'm kind of the big picture person. If you want to have a policy discussion or ask about programmatic issues, they would be good people to contact. Just like my address is Julie@Vermontcarepartners.org, their addresses are the same. It's Dylan@Vermontcarepartners.org and Marie@Vermontcarepartners.org. And that's it. That's the information I have to present. I would be very glad to entertain questions, comments, concerns. Hopefully, we can do that.

I guess it's in the chat. Are there -- anyone have questions in the chat?

I don't see any.

>> MARIE LALLIER: If people want to raise their hands, Julie, we can do that, too.

>> JULIE TESSLER: Why don't we do that. Folx, is there any other information that would be helpful to you? Okay. Well, I talked fast. I'm sorry. I'm originally from New York, as I mentioned. I hope this would -- was helpful. And feel free to let me know how you would approve on it or whatever follow-up questions you might have at a later point.

>> MARIE LALLIER: It looks like we might have a question coming in, Julie. Give us one second.

>> JULIE TESSLER: Oh, okay. Hold in there.

>> MARIE LALLIER: It's the start of a question, I think. Laurie, do you want me to un-mute you? Is that easier? Or open up your -- oh. Here's a question, Julie.

>> JULIE TESSLER: Okay. It's a great question. Is it useful to connect with legislators who are not your district rep? Yes. Absolutely. If they are the person who is on a key committee, it is fine to reach out to them on the topic that you wanted to talk with them. So, especially a chair of a committee is helpful to reach out to. And they expect that. It's nice to have a direct connection, but it's fine, if not. And also, like, if you're -- let's say you work at Counselling Services of Addison County but you living in Burlington and want to talk about something in Addison County, the fact that you live in Addison County is certainly enough. Not everyone has a representative on the Healthcare Committee or the Senate Health and Welfare Committee. You can actually send an email to every member of the committee with what you

have to say. You can also contact the chairperson and let them know that maybe you want to testify or you want to share information and all the committee members to get it.

Sometimes, what I'll do is send that email kind of to the committee chair and copy the staff person for the committee whose contact information is also on the website and say, you know, I would like to share this information. Please share it with all committee members. And I didn't mention -- I'm sorry to say -- that the first week of February, we are asking committees if we can provide testimony as part of Mental Health Advocacy Day. So, if there is something that you have on your mind that you would like to testify, whether it's sharing your personal experiences as either a person with a mental health condition or a staff person working in an agency, whatever -- wherever you're coming from, it's fine. Contact me and we will be setting that up. So, let me know.

A second question came in. Thank you. How important is 100% consistency in messaging? There's 60 parents working on housing for adults with developmental disabilities. I don't -- I think sometimes it's great to provide consistent messaging, but if you're all responsible to present our perspectives. Especially if you're a parent and you're representing your child, you say what's on your mind and what's in your heart. I work for Vermont Care Partners so I take direction from the boards and the agencies, but when you are a parent, a family member, just say what's on your mind, and it doesn't matter whether you agree with Vermont Care Partners or State government or whatever. Share. Make demands. That's the democratic process. It's really messy, and it should be, and it gives those different perspectives to help us all get to a better place. So, do share. Don't worry about consistency. Even if the 60 parents don't all see things the same, that's fine, too. It's important to get your perspective out there.

And the House Human Services Committee will very much respect that. This next question is: At this point, who should we contact with respect to getting retention bonuses? Appropriations Committee? Yes. Today, if you can do it today, the House Human Services Committee and early tomorrow will be looking at this. I think that we've provided great testimony to the House Healthcare Committee. So I think they already are pretty much bought in, but it doesn't do any harm to let them know that you need a retention bonus and it needs to be significant.

But the Appropriations Committee will be working on this all week. They're the ones that make the ultimate decision. So, if you don't have an Appropriations Committee person living in your district or your agency, write to the chair and ask that your perspective be shared. We have a wonderful State representative who is working on our issues. Each person in the committee has leads on different topics. Our Representative, Dave Yacovone from Morrisville, is taking the lead on developmental and mental health services. He is making a very strong pitch that we need a significant investment. But he needs our support with the other members of the committee to convince them that we need significant retention bonuses. We're also asking that those bonuses -- that the moneys distributed be flexible. So, maybe in your agency, they also are gonna need it for hazard pay because staff are caring for people with COVID. Or just doing shift differentials, overtime pay. There's different ways to support staff. So, we've asked for flexibility to do that. So, thank you. That was a great question.

And nice comment from Laurie Mumley saying, we are all parents with different stories. Absolutely. What works for one person doesn't -- that goes back to that issue of flexibility. What works for services needs to be individualized. Agency staffing also needs to be individualized. So, that is important. One other things legislators really want is to make sure that money is used wisely and we're accountable for it. It's a little hard for them to say, oh, yes, use it flexibly. Oh, very good spelling for David Yacovone. You've got it right. You can look on the website. Yacovone is not an easy name to spell. He's been the commissioner of the committee of Disability and Independent Living. He's run Green Mountain Support Services and a parent of a son with developmental disabilities, so he understands from all different perspectives what it is, the challenges that folx are facing right now, and he's going to do everything he can to support community-based mental health, developmental disability, and substance use disorder services. We're very lucky he's a champion.

When we get through the house, we also need to reach out to senators. And since there's only 30 senators, reach out to every one of your senators from your district as well as the Appropriations Committee and Senate Health and Welfare Committee. Every Senator has a voice and we need to reach them because there are lots of challenges out there. And they set priorities in part from what they hear from people. If one Senator or one Representative hears from five or six people, that is enough to influence. Goes back to the quote at the beginning, you only need a small group of people to have an impact. So, it would be great if all 60 parents in the group around housing reach out. They already have and have already had an impact, but sometimes if it's 5 or 6 or 3 or 4, you'd be surprised at the amount of impact you can have, especially when you have a story to tell from the heart. And that includes from our staff, who are stretched so thin right now.

Any questions or comments, concerns? I'll give it a few minutes for those of us who are slow typers.

Oh, will there be a link to share this presentation? Another good question that I should have thought of that. We are recording it and we'll put it on the Vermont Care Partners website. So, yeah, please share it. We want people to kind of understand how this all works and to have information they need. So, we'll put it on the website and we can put it under "legislative view."

I always find websites confusing to look for things. But I think it's under "what's new?" And then "legislative view." And we'll put it there. There's the link for the website.

Thank you, Marie. Okay. Well, I want to thank people for coming today and taking time to participate. And we're here. Marie's here. Dylan's here. I'm here. Vermont Care Partners is here to support our system of care. That's our purpose and the system of care includes the people served, the people we would like to be serving, the people who work in the system, family members, peers. We're here to support you and appreciate the work that you all do and the value of your lives. No matter who you are, we're there for you and want to support you.

Thank you for participating. Marie, do you want to close us out? I want to thank the interpreters again. Thank you so much. And to Marie for making this happen.

>> MARIE LALLIER: I think we're all set, Julie, if there aren't any more questions. If anyone thinks of something later, they can send an email.

>> JULIE TESSLER: Great. Do you want to close us out?