



Supporting Vermonters to lead healthy and satisfying lives community by community

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE FOR SESSION WEEK 1 (January 3rd to 5th)

Full Speed Ahead for the 2024 Legislative Session!

"It's day 1 but it feels like day 76!" Stated a member of the legislature at the onset of the new session. It's the second year of the biennium so work began quickly and furiously with new bills being taken up, existing bills hitting the ground running, and lots of chatter about the Budget Adjustment Act. The Vermont Care Partners team was in full action mode this week covering committees to hear about the upcoming priorities for the session. Unsurprisingly, mental health and its impact on Vermont was mentioned in many of our key committees. We're excited to note that the Budget Adjustment currently includes language supportive of our ask for an increase to the Choices for Care Medicaid rate to align with the FY24 5% rate increase for developmental and mental health services.

We'll continue to follow along closely to ensure the funding is retroactive to July 1, 2023.

THIS WEEK'S COMMITTEE AND WORKGROUP HIGHLIGHTS

Senate Appropriations – The committee started the week discussing the stark reality of the financial situation for FY25. They noted that we might see core services level funded this year. There will be a lot of competing priorities and they wondered if there are any commitments they might need to discontinue. They stated that the funding requests usually exceed the Governor's budget by \$400-500 million.

Senator Sears highlighted public safety as well as vacancies in social services as big issues with the hopes that funding will be prioritized in this sector. The workforce was also referenced including "counseling degrees being devastated" as folks move out of the state. The committee continued this thread highlighting an unreferenced national statistic that the workforce gap is one we won't recover from for 12-15 years. The committee ended with a remark that the state needs long-term solutions not short-term change.

Adam Greshin presentation on the BAA on Friday – good news here! The 5% COLA for Choices for Care and Adult Family Care is in the DAIL section of the BAA. More work to do but good to see it prioritized. Link to the BAA worksheet [HERE](#)





House Human Services – This week HHS discussed member updates and priorities for the session. Noted in committee: modernizing GA housing, AHEAD model, DCF high-end system of care, veterans healthcare and mental health, youth homelessness, modernizing plan for SNAP benefits, affordable housing, residential recovery providers, stabilization beds, overdose reversal and referral treatment, child voice in the court system, act 76, act 27, overdose prevention and how services are impacted, self-identify gender on birth cert, modernize Reach Up work requirements, public safety, childcare and stars quality system, government accountability. Just to name a few!

Senate Education – On January 3rd the committee members discussed legislative priorities for the session. These included (non-exhaustive) literacy screening in pre-k to screen for delays, ensuring the board of education is more equitable, admission/attestation for independent schools not discriminatory, PCB & school construction, social media/cell phones in schools, and mental health issues in schools with attention being paid to data on suicidal ideation and depression.

H.409 WORKGROUP – Seclusion and Restraints: Jeff Francis from the Vermont Superintendents Association brought members of the legislature, superintendents, public educators, and DA representatives together to discuss H.409 and see if there's a way to find some common ground. Representative Theresa Wood gave her rationale for introducing the bill and did a walk through that allowed for questions and commentary. Ultimately the group discussed that the language of the 4500 (an administrative rule) seemed to include components that felt supportive to some degree. Rep. Wood will circle back to the legislature to see what's possible and what changes might be made to feel supportive of schools, mental health professionals, children, and families.

Senate Health and Welfare – This week SHW did a walkthrough of S.89 (forensic facility). Afterward DAIL Commissioner Schurr presented the findings of the legislatively created workgroup. He highlighted where the group disagreed and where the group converged. Senator Hardy asked for clarity on what is left to figure out. The facility is happening but trying to determine who will be able to access the 9 beds. Senator Lyons gave kudos to the working group for all they did over the course of their meetings. There will be ongoing work and testimony connected to the bill. Workgroup findings linked [HERE](#)

They also discussed priorities for the session including – housing/homelessness (act 81) and ensuring MH SU needs are met, long term care facilities, GA housing program, mental health and needing long term solutions, healthcare reform, forensic facility, S.211, S.214, Medicaid coverage for douglas (S.109), obesity, S.98 – prescription drug cost limits, affordable equitable care/decreasing healthcare costs.



House Appropriations – Secretary Samuelson from the Agency of Human Services provided a high-level overview of the BAA proposal for AHS. Her spreadsheet on the ups and downs can be found [HERE](#)

House Healthcare – Presentation on new interstate compact for social work licensure.

- Highlights of bill
 - Officially joining new interstate compact to allow social work license reciprocity – BSW, LMSW, and LICSW licenses
- Advantages
 - Improve access to care for clients
 - Lessen burden on clinicians, financially and administratively, to practice in VT
 - Continuity of care - enable VT practitioners to maintain contact with clients when they travel out of state (and vice versa)
 - Facilitates recruitment for agencies – easier and less costly for out of state social workers to move to VT and to begin to practice without delay
 - Less delay allows agencies/practitioners to bill for their services sooner
- Concerns
 - Impact on finances of reduced fees collection
 - Applicants will pay one fee in their state to join the compact, rather than paying fees for each state they wish to practice in.
 - Rep Cina suggests outweighed by benefits
 - Fees intended to fund administration of licenses – home state is the one doing the administration and that is where the fee is collected
 - State would have less of an idea of who is practicing in this state as their home states grant interstate licensure
- Testimony
 - Several social workers testified about their experience practicing across state lines. Themes echoed the advantages highlighted above: financial burden of licensure in multiple states (initial application and cost of continued education); administrative burden of renewals; continuity of care; military spouses can more easily move with their families and continue working; increased recruitment; increased access to care.

SPONSOR SPOTLIGHT SERIES



The Sponsor Spotlight Series is part of a collaboration produced by members of Vermont Care Partners – the statewide network for sixteen non-profit, community-based agencies providing mental health, substance use, and intellectual and developmental disability support.

This Week's Agency Spotlight: [Youth with disabilities aiming high – with success](#)

BILLS, ACTS, RESOLUTIONS DISCUSSED THIS WEEK – QUICK LINKS

[H.409 – Education; Seclusion and Restraints](#)

[H.543 – Social Work Licensure Compact](#)

[Act 27 \(S.89\) – An Act Related to Establishing a Forensic Facility](#)

ADVOCACY TOOLS

The [Vermont General Assembly](#) website helps you to navigate the state house and get up to date information on:

- Committee assignments
- Weekly committee agendas
- Legislator information – including contact info, assigned committees, bio, sponsored bills, etc.
- Bills, acts, resolutions
- State house announcements and events
- Maps of the statehouse
- And more!

FIND YOUR LEGISLATOR! A handy list of key committees, committee members, and the DA/SSA connected to each. Find it [HERE](#)

Housing and Homelessness Alliance of Vermont – [2024 Legislative Priorities](#)

IN THE NEWS

- [The 2024 Legislative Session Kicks Off](#)
- [Session Opens on Somber Note](#) – Rep. Mary-Katherine Stone discusses the unprovoked shooting of three Palestinian-American men in Burlington
- Governor's State of the State: Full Transcript [HERE](#)
- Listen to the recording – [HERE](#)
- [Phil Scott Tackles Vermont's Demographic Challenges](#)

FY25 BUDGET ASK & STATUTE LANGUAGE



A Medicaid Rate Increase is A Top Priority

Vermont Care Partners is requesting a 6.5% Medicaid rate increase as our top priority which yields a 5.63% increase overall for agencies. This rate increase is based on a robust analysis conducted by the VCP network agency finance directors of critical factors necessary to keep the lights on and maintain services for the people we serve. The analysis focused on five categories: salaries, health insurance, other fringe, other insurance, and all other operating expenses. The proposed increase combined the following factors:

- A 5% salary increase based on the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics;
- An average projected health insurance increase of 16.6%;
- An average projected increase of 7% for other fringe;
- General/liability/auto/property insurance projected to increase an average of 10.8%; and
- All other operating projected to increase 3.3% based on New England CPI, updated through October.

This analysis is consistent with 18 V.S.A. § 8914 which directs the Secretary of Human Services to adjust agency rates to take into account factors that reflect changes in reasonable costs of goods and services of designated and specialized service agencies, including those attributed to inflation and labor market dynamics.

Chapter 207 : Community Mental Health and Developmental Services

(Cite as: 18 V.S.A. § 8914)

- **§ 8914. Rates of payments to designated and specialized service agencies**

(a) The Secretary of Human Services shall have sole responsibility for establishing the Departments of Health's, of Mental Health's, and of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living's rates of payments for designated and specialized service agencies that are reasonable and adequate to achieve the required outcomes for designated populations. When establishing rates of payment for designated and specialized service agencies, the Secretary shall adjust rates to take into account factors that include:

(1) the reasonable cost of any governmental mandate that has been enacted, adopted, or imposed by any State or federal authority; and



(2) a cost adjustment factor to reflect changes in reasonable costs of goods and services of designated and specialized service agencies, including those attributed to inflation and labor market dynamics.

(b) When establishing rates of payment for designated and specialized service agencies, the Secretary may consider geographic differences in wages, benefits, housing, and real estate costs in each region of the State. (Added 2017, No. 82, § 11, eff. June 15, 2017.)

We're also asking for an increase to the Eldercare program - The Eldercare program serves older Vermonters facing mental health and substance use challenges who have limited access to services and supports. An additional **\$453,000** GF is necessary to achieve full funding of the program which has been level funded for years.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Governor's Budget Address – Slated for January 23, 2024, at 1pm

Vermont Care Partners – Legislative Advocacy Webinar: January 22, 2024, 12 - 1 PM. Please Register in advance: https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_THn65NOPSUqY-fBttJm44Q

Join us for Mental Health Advocacy January 29, 2024

On Monday, January 29th please join us from 10 AM to 2 PM for an interesting and interactive virtual webinar. This year's theme is "**Welcoming and Caring Communities – Belonging for All**". The morning features a panel of legislators facilitated by Mental Health Commissioner Emily Hawes who will address how a sense of belonging contributes to mental wellness and how to best advocate for inclusive communities. A second panel facilitated by Robin Shabazz will be composed of people with diverse experiences who will address why belonging how to create a sense of belonging. We will also recognize unsung heroes with awards. In the afternoon people will share their stories of hope and recovery.

As part of this advocacy event VCP, VAMHAR and NAMI-VT, the organizers of the event, will be coordinating testimony at key legislative committees and will have a display set up at the card room in the State House.

Registration Link for the Day of the

Event: https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_1gc2eCabS6uazCojYlkuUA (please register in advance)

Registration to Share Your Story: <https://namivt.org/2024-advocacy-day-share-your-story/>



Agenda for Advocacy Day

10:00 am Welcome and Introductions

10:15–11:00 am Legislative Panel: Advocacy to Strengthen our Sense Belonging and Mental Wellness

11:00–11:45 am Community Leader Panel: How does a sense of belonging support mental health and how can we strengthen it?

11:45–12:00 pm Mental Health Advocacy Day Awards

12:00–12:30 pm Lunch Break

12:30–2:00 pm Sharing Stories – Live and pre-recorded

Jan. 30–Feb. 2 Testimony at Key Legislative Committees (schedule to be sent once finalized)

Vermont Care Partners – Legislative Advocacy Webinar: January 22, 2024 (12 - 1 PM). Please Register in advance: https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_THn65NOPSUqY-fBttJm44Q This is an excellent opportunity to learn advocacy skills and the information necessary to become an effective mental health advocate.

Registration for NAMI Smarts Training - Saturday, January 13, 2024:

Modules 1, 2 & 3 – “Telling Your Story, Contacting and Meeting Your Policymaker”

<https://namivt.org/advocacy/nami-smarts-registration/>

Homelessness Awareness Day – Thursday January 18, 2024

Service and shelter providers and housing advocates from across the state will join homeless and formerly homeless Vermonters to reflect on all we must do in the coming year to end homelessness in Vermont!

This year’s Homelessness Awareness Day will take place at the statehouse in Montpelier, virtually, and at many locations around the state on Thursday January 18th. The Housing & Homelessness Alliance of Vermont, Vermont Interfaith Action, and Chittenden County Homeless Alliance are sponsoring the activities related to Homelessness Awareness Day.

[2024 Homelessness Awareness Day - Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness \(helpingtohousevt.org\)](https://helpingtohousevt.org)

NAMI-VT Fact Sheet on Mental Health

Here is the [NAMI-VT fact sheet on mental health](#).

VERMONT CARE PARTNERS’ 2024 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

Other Important Legislative Priorities Include:

1. Educating about the Value of Designated and Specialized Service Agencies
2. I/DD Service Delivery and Payment Reform



- 3.** Educating about the Increasing Acuity of Individuals with I/DD including those with Forensic Needs
- 4.** Planning and Implementing of the CCBHC Model
- 5.** Adjustments for Mental Health Warrant Statute Act 25
- 6.** Access to Affordable Housing for Staff and People Served including Supportive Housing Maintaining Community-Based Principles and Principles of the DD Act and State System of Care Plan
- 7.** Current or Anticipated Gaps in Services for Investments as Acuity and Demand Increases
- 8.** Investment in Home and Community-Based Services in Health Reform Initiatives
- 9.** Strong Stakeholder Involvement in Payment and Service Delivery Reform Process for Substance Use Services
- 10.** Suicide Prevention
- 11.** Peer Certification Program, Training and Medicaid Funding
- 12.** Reducing Unnecessary Use of Seclusion and Restraint
- 13.** Expand Access to Affordable Housing
- 14.** Preventing NIMBYism to Support Residential and Treatment Facility Development
- 15.** Sustainable Funding for Public Inebriate Programs
- 16.** Access to Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Services
- 17.** Mental Health Needs of Individuals Involved in Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice Systems
- 18.** Adoption by Vermont of the Social Work Interstate Compact
- 19.** Protection of ABLE Savings Accounts
- 20.** Improved Funding for Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA)
- 21.** Increased Resources for Youth Crisis Stabilization Across Vermont
- 22.** Medicaid funding for doula services