

Theresa Utton

Subject: FW: Cuts will create more problems than they solve

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Dear Committee Member,

As you are pondering on cuts to state funding over the next 24 hours, I would like you to consider what these cuts look like to those in the community who are “doing work” for the state—with plenty of regulation and paperwork, but without the protection and employment guarantees typical of state employees and unionized workers. We are people who take care of those who are most vulnerable in our community—those with mental disabilities—by offering them a shared home and 24/7 hands-on services, just as an adoptive parent cares for a child. It is a serious commitment. Yet we are the state’s invisible workers: we have no institutional status, and no professional or trade organization to speak for us, so our voices are rarely, if ever, heard by those who make state funding decisions. Consequently, it is easy to overlook us. My hope is that this letter will make us—and our financial concerns—visible to you.

I am a Shared Living Provider (SLP) for Champlain Community Services (CCS) in Colchester. Since 2006, I have shared my home with one of the agency’s clients, JB, a middle aged woman with Downs Syndrome. JB was living in difficult circumstances with her remaining parent who was suffering from advancing Alzheimer’s, so her need for an alternative living situation was crucial. At about the same time, I was at risk of losing my home through the financial uncertainties of divorce from my husband who suffered mental illness. By matching up with JB, I have been able to keep my house and continue providing a safe and consistent setting to my four children as well as giving JB an affectionate, familial home.

Seems an easy solution for someone like me—get state cash to keep the house going in exchange for just another person taking up the spare room? Perhaps—and yet, it doesn’t always look that way. It doesn’t look that way at 2 a.m. when your boarder has a nightmare or is sick and you have to get up and attend them even though you have to be up in a few hours to get ready for work, and it doesn’t look that way at the end of that very long day when all you want to do is sit and be quiet but your boarder continues to shout at an imaginary friend. And it doesn’t look that way when you have to use your personal days off work to take your boarder to appointments, or when you have to try to keep your boarder from bursting into a hysterical frenzy over having blood drawn, or when you have to wipe an adult bottom because of diarrhea; or in the last hour of a six-hour trip to the emergency room because your boarder fainted and her primary doctor’s office doesn’t have sufficient staff to give her a check-up. At times, it looks very definitely *uneasy*, such as when your legal documents go missing because your boarder loves collecting paper, or when you can’t join an exercise program because you can’t afford to pay someone to take care of your boarder; or when you find \$200-worth of food defrosted because your boarder decided to unplug the freezer.

So, it’s not as simple as it looks. It is analogous to becoming an adoptive parent, as Elizabeth Sightler of CCS described it to out-of-state officials visiting us to view Vermont’s way of caring for people with disabilities. And yet, adoptive parents can look forward to a diminishing of their responsibilities and duties. For those working with the mentally disabled, those responsibilities and duties only increase as our clients age and their abilities decline even further.

Compensation for sharing my home and my life in this way comes in the form of a stipend and living allowance (room and board). These have been critical for me to keep my household functioning for all of us in the past eight years, but it has become increasingly difficult to do this as expenses have sky-rocketed while income has stagnated. For example, comparing 2006 to 2014 rates, a sampling of 10 basic foods such as bread, tomatoes, chicken is 43% more, while the rate for gas (for car, heating and hot water) is 57% more, and firewood is 62 % more. These are just three elements of a household, but, as you yourselves know, nothing has

actually decreased in cost, and most things such as insurance and communications have increased significantly. On the other hand, compensation for SLP work/room and board, has increased by less than 8% in the same period—that’s less than 1 percent per year. Interestingly, when I checked the University of Vermont’s records for room and board rates, I found that the cheapest plan available has increased in that same period by 41% (I am paid in 2014 for a single room and home cooking, about \$400 less per year than UVM charged in 2006 for a shared room and cafeteria food). I would be ecstatically happy if the SLP room and board had increased by that much—and in fact, if I was running my home as a business (like UVM) then I should be charging that level of increase. But, of course, I simply accept the contract amount allocated with its meager increase and make up the difference in increased cost using income from my job as a public school teacher. Unluckily, since I work in one of the lowest paying districts in the state, my ability to continue to supplement in this way looks very shaky. This is especially the case now, since my debt for college loans (\$72,000) for myself and my children (all top 10% of graduating class and two of them Phi Beta Kappa graduates) are now in repayment and I have had to apply for income sensitivity in repayment options.

This conundrum—rising costs juxtaposed with stagnant income—is one that may eventually lead to the crisis that bringing a client into my home initially averted. I am looking very carefully at how I can possibly stay in this house—providing a home for a CCS client—while the income and outgoings are increasingly out of line. The pressure has increased this year already because the new AFSME union negotiated a much-deserved increase in pay rates for community support workers, and that cost passes onto people like me who pay other people in the community to care for our boarders when we need a break. For me, without extra funding, that pay increase for community care means reducing my respite by more than a quarter—and of course, the community care people will not see a pay increase, just fewer hours. Further, if this committee proceeds with the Governor’s proposed 4% cut to budgets for community mental health, developmental and substance abuse services, CCS has said SLPs like me will not receive the \$1,000 end of year payment in 2015 that, excepting one year, we use to make up our shortfalls. Usually, I use the payment to buy wood pellets for the winter early so they are less expensive. If I have to buy them on a weekly basis, I end up paying about 15-20% more. In other words, the move to cut the state’s budget in order to lower taxes for all, means significant increases in costs for people like me, those who are already struggling financially, who are doing the state’s work invisibly—and a type of work that requires a rare level of commitment, patience, and sensitivity for such nominal return.

I understand the drive to reduce state spending is fuelled by alarmed tax payers, many of whom defeated school budgets up and down the state this year (including my own school district) and I believe we all share the difficulties of rising costs. However, I believe that while continued reliance on squeezing pennies from the poorest and most vulnerable people in our community may provide temporary relief for some, it will not solve this problem in the long run. It will likely precipitate crises that will only end up costing the state more to manage and clean up. These are very tough decisions for you to make, and I appreciate the time each of you is taking to figure out the best way ahead. I have provided some figures below that clarify some of the main points I have discussed.

Sincerely,

Eve Thorsen Duff

1) Cost comparison 2006/2014 of 10 basic foods and fuel in Chittenden County, VT

Food

<i>Item</i>	<i>2006</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>Increase</i>
bread	\$.108	\$2.07	
milk	\$3 gallon	\$3.60	
eggs	\$1.24 doz	\$2	
Peanut butter	\$1.73 lb	\$2.36	

bananas	\$0.51	\$0.62	
tomatoes	\$1.46 lb	\$1.83	
bacon	\$3.40 lb	\$5.46	
Ground beef	\$2.74	\$3.70	
Whole chicken	\$1.06	\$1.56	
	16.22	\$23.20	43%

Fuel

<i>Item</i>	<i>2006</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>Increase</i>
Gas (car/heating/hot water)	\$2.28 gallon	\$3.60 gallon	57%
Wood pellets	\$2.15	\$2.50	16%
Firewood	\$1.70 cord	\$2.75 cord	62%

2) Comparison of UVM room and board rates (least expensive rates)

2006 \$4,936 (R) + \$2,396 (B) = \$7,332

2014 \$6,884 (R) + \$3,558 (B) = \$10,402

Increase = 41.8% over 8 years

3) Comparison average UVM room and board rate 2014 (7 months) with SLP room and board rate 2014 (12 months)

Average UVM room and board total = \$10,706

Average per month = \$1,529

SLP room and board = \$8,396

Average per month = \$699

4) Comparison of rates of pay for Community Care Respite (24 hour) and SLP rates (stipend + room and board – respite budget)

CC Respite daily rate (24 hrs) = \$150

SLP daily rate (24 hrs) = \$89.82