

Testimony Regarding Mental Health Service Guidelines for Municipalities

April 11, 2024



Testimony of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns
Ted Brady, Executive Director
House Committee on Health Care
Regarding H. 189 (Mental Health Service Guidelines for Municipalities)
April 9, 2024

Thank you for seeking the input of VLCT on S. 189 – a bill relating to the creation of mental health response service guidelines for municipalities. My name is Ted Brady, and I serve as VLCT’s Executive Director. VLCT represents all 247 cities and towns in Vermont – and exists to serve and strengthen municipal government.

First, a quick acknowledgement of the overwhelming impact mental health related emergencies are having on our municipalities. As a one example, VLCT just conducted a

survey of Vermont's 53 municipal police departments, including an invite to every single municipal chief and officer to participate. Not surprisingly, one of the top four issues facing municipal police departments was reported to be "reliance on police to respond to mental health, substance use disorder, and unhoused populations." Also on the list: staffing constraints, limited funding, and drug related crimes.

Key Takeaways from the Survey

Major issues facing municipal police departments include:

- *Low or inadequate levels of staffing*
- *Limited resources (e.g. funding, equipment, and facility capacity)*
- *Reliance on police to respond to mental health, substance use disorder, and unhoused populations*
- *Drug related crimes and theft/larceny*

The issues facing municipal law enforcement are often interconnected meaning that operational issues impact law enforcement's ability to address non-criminal and criminal issues and vice versa.

Some interesting strategies for address the issues discussed included cross-training law enforcement in other first responder fields (i.e., EMT) collaboration with external and embedded social service providers, and data driven patrols.

Every two years, our membership establishes a comprehensive municipal policy – a set of core policy outcomes every city and town in Vermont votes to establish. I want to bring the committee's attention to Section 3.02 of our municipal policy: Corrections, Mental Health, and Addiction. 3.02.1 calls for a "statewide, integrated approach for mental health and addiction services across health, human services, and public safety departments and agencies." 3.02.03 calls for "developing collaborative solutions among all affected stakeholders to handle incapacitated persons."

I believe the establishment of a mental health response service guideline would advance both of these policy goals, and as such, VLCT supports Section 1 of the bill, amending 18 V.S.A. § 7260. However, VLCT would request that the Legislature hear directly from first responders who would be impacted by this bill before final passage.

Attachments

Testimony to House Health Care