

Appropriations Committee Testimony on Bill No. 6824
Marina Derman, Westport

My husband and I have lived in Westport for nearly 25 years now. We have two sons, Kyle (21) and Clay (19), both of whom carry the diagnoses of autism and intellectual disability.

I am here today **in support of increasing the budget for DDS overall.**

I am in support of **providing increased funding in the area of residential services**, so that the 2,000+ people with disabilities who are waiting for residential placement can be served.

But, specifically, I am here to raise your awareness of the **huge disservice being done by slashing the budget for DDS VSP** (Voluntary Services Program).

You may know that VSP has as its mandate the support of the most behaviorally challenging of our intellectually disabled population. So, to qualify for VSP services, a person must have not only an intellectual disability that would qualify for them for DDS, but also must have severe emotional, psychiatric, and behavioral challenges. VSP's mandate is to provide services, support, and parent training to keep these children from being institutionalized.

In the proposed budget, VSP was reduced by \$19.9 million this year and \$35.8 million over two years. This is a reduction of more than 60%! These cuts would be devastating to a family like mine.

To illustrate, let me tell you about my son Clay, who has autism, a measured IQ in the 40s, very limited language, and extreme (and sometimes violent) mood swings. He's also 6'2".

Clay started having meltdowns in kindergarten. Over the years, tantrums became more frequent and more aggressive, until in 5th grade the school district decided they could not handle him any more and outplaced him to a private special education school that specializes in managing severe behaviors.

As Clay got older, he got stronger and his tantrums became more serious. He would frequently attack whichever parent was nearby without warning, in a frenzy where he truly appeared out of his mind. As he grew stronger it became harder and harder to defend ourselves (especially his 5'2" mother). His self-injurious behavior was also serious – with bloody hand-bites, bruises up and down his arms from biting, and hard pinches to his sides and abdomen also leaving bruises. Scar tissue formed on his hands from the constant biting, and his arms never, ever fully healed. I also frequently had bite-marks on my arms, and rips

in my sweaters, from the hand-to-hand combat of dealing with his tantrums. Once, on the beach, a kind bystander (seeing bruises going up and down my arms) mistakenly believed I was an abused wife, and tried to give me information for a women's shelter. It was humiliating and gut-wrenching to have to explain that this wasn't from my husband – it was my son. The house also suffered damage – Clay would roll around in his bed in a frenzy, and kick holes in the walls. All throughout this time, we experimented with a range of pharmaceutical, nutritional, and behavioral treatments, which ranged from slightly effective to counterproductive. Our marriage suffered under the stress of the situation, not knowing what the next minute could bring. We applied to DDS for help, through the DCF Voluntary program.

For several years Clay was in DDS, receiving a series of small grants. In 2012 he was finally accepted into the DDS Voluntary Services Program. This was life-changing for Clay, and for our family. With a VSP budget that allows Clay a substantial amount of time out in the community (about 20 hours per week), he became more active, had less downtime, and his negative behaviors declined dramatically. He is a changed person from the unhappy, unpredictable young man he was a few years ago. His tantrums are substantially less frequent, and mostly less intense. His activity time also gives us parents respite breaks, allowing us to have the energy to be better parents to this high-needs young man and to his less-disabled brother. He is a happier person, and I am grateful every day for that. Before we received VSP support, we were a family in crisis. Since the advent of these supports, we are a calmer family, with greater capability to support our two special-needs children. While he still has occasional bouts of anger and aggression, he is now in the care of an agency that knows how to handle these behaviors appropriately.

You can imagine our concern as we read about proposed evisceration of the VSP program, with the potential for reducing or taking away these services from our fragile children. I hope that this story shows you the critical importance of VSP services to our families, and the importance of maintaining the budget to continue these vital services. I am asking that you restore the funds cut from VSP, and provide any increase required to provide for increased population growth.