

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
One strong united voice for Minnesota workers

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Honorable Members of the House Human Services Finance Committee:

AFSCME Council 5 is a union of 43,000 working Minnesotans who collectively deliver a wide array of public services across our state. We advocate for excellence in public services, dignity in the workplace, and opportunity and prosperity for all workers. Excellent public services require investment.

We write in opposition to a funding proposal attempting to fix the lack of capacity within our state-provided, safety-net, psychiatric treatment programs with a mere \$7 million investment. This is a problem that has been thoroughly documented by the legislature, counties, jails, hospitals, mental-health advocates and more; it requires significant investment, with some estimates suggesting as much as \$150 million. The proposal to supplement this funding increase through “resource reallocation”, in the way of closing multiple Community Addiction Recovery Programs (Carlton, St. Peter, & Willmar) is untenable. Meager investment and wishful thinking will not thoroughly solve the backlog of needed psychiatric beds.

Simply reallocating resources misses the mark. Take CARE Carlton for example, a woman’s-only facility where many of the patients served have experienced physical and sexual abuse, are pregnant, and live with a mental illness and substance use disorder. All the staff who work in this facility are women and some of them have similar lived experiences, making this work more than just a job, but a calling in life where they can help others heal. The proposal to close CARE Carlton begs the question: where will these women go? The answer, at least for the women who work at the facility in Carlton, has been to 1) relocate their lives or 2) remain with DCT and work at the Moose Lake Sex Offender Program, with the clients who have perpetrated the very heinous acts which they help individuals recover from. This, in our opinion, is wishful thinking.

At CARE St. Peter, DCT leadership has indicated they are “counting on staff who currently work at CARE St. Peter to stay with DCT”. While we certainly hope this happens, should the Legislature adopt this proposal despite our concerns, we question the outcome. Staff at CARE St. Peter have had ample opportunity to move over to either the State Operated Forensic Services or the MN Sex Offender Program where they would receive enhanced pay and benefits, yet the job vacancy rate at Forensic Services remains in the double digits, prior to any expansion efforts.

The solution requires investment. If you want to eliminate the backlog and lower the job vacancy rate, you must invest seriously in the workforce which you are tasking with a very challenging job. Austerity measures during a supplemental budget year with a sizable surplus are unacceptable. While we sincerely appreciate the prudent approach to long-term budget planning, this problem should not be solved by cutting other critically important services.

Please proceed with great caution and fully consider the effect cutting safety-net substance use disorder treatment capacity will have. We support increasing psychiatric capacity, but this proposal you’re asked to consider is only a partial solution, and a suspect one at that.

Respectfully,

Ethan Vogel
Legislative Director