

March 23, 2020

Kevin Mullin, Chair
Green Mountain Care Board
144 State Street
Montpelier, Vermont 05602

Re: Chief Medical Officer Comments on Hospital Budget Guidance

Dear Chair Mullin:

On behalf of the Chief Medical Officers at Vermont's hospitals, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Green Mountain Care Board's budget guidance. As health care providers, we do not normally engage directly in the hospital budget process, but we feel compelled to outline the pressures our hospitals are under during this unique time.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, hospitals have brought their expertise in maintaining and managing access to care. They have created capacity for negative pressure rooms, opened new treatment areas, and invested in screening devices for staff and visitors. Our labs have invested in specialized testing equipment to allow in-house testing for COVID-19. We test staff and patients, both symptomatic and asymptomatic, for COVID, on a regular basis. We have stood up new monoclonal antibody infusion units.

In addition to patient care, hospitals have been integral to Vermont's public health response. The Agency of Human Services asked Vermont's hospitals to assist with the state supply chain for PPE and testing supplies, surveillance testing, and vaccinating our communities. Vermont's hospitals partnered with the state to meet these public health demands, contributing to the success of Vermont's response we see today.

This work, however, has come at a cost. Our salaried employees have been working well beyond their scheduled FTEs for the past year, and there is no end in sight. Recruiting of new health care personnel has been extremely difficult in these troubled times. Temporary staffing costs have soared, and at times, has not been available. We are facing some early retirements and career changes that leave us with even more staffing difficulty. Even with the vaccines, COVID-19 variants and deferred health care continue to make the day-to-day work of providing health care incredibly unpredictable. Emergency departments are seeing higher acuity and more frequent admissions. There is an increase in patients in mental health crisis. This at a time when over 30% of mental health inpatient beds have been closed due to staffing issues. Resources are stretched thin, and hospitals are challenged to meet the needs of continuously changing landscape.

In the face of this ongoing unpredictability, clinical leaders like us need the resources and the budgetary space to adapt care delivery according to rapidly changing needs without imposing additional moral distress on our workforce. We can rise to the occasion and deliver high value

care when we are empowered and given the resources to make decisions that are clinically coherent. In the past year, we have collectively demonstrated that we can deliver on that promise. We are up to the challenge. We share the accountability for the single purpose of meeting the healthcare needs of our community, as fellow Vermonters. We ask that you frame the hospital budgetary process and its guideposts beyond the envisioned statewide margin, to allow us the space, flexibility and resources to exercise sound clinical judgement while remaining fiscally responsible.

Thank you for your consideration. Please feel free to contact Devon Green at VAHHS for further information.

Sincerely,



Kathleen McGraw, M.D., Chair
VAHHS Chief Medical Officers