

Via email: Emily.hawes@vermont.gov

January 31, 2024

Emily Hawes, Commissioner
Vermont Department of Mental Health
280 State Drive, NOB 2 North
Waterbury, VT 05671-2010

Re: *Vermont Psychiatric Survivors, Inc.*
Grant Award No. 0315-A1931

Dear Commissioner Hawes:

We, the undersigned, are members of Vermont's psychiatric survivor community. We write to request that the Vermont Department of Mental Health issue a Request for Proposal for the services now purportedly provided by Vermont Psychiatric Survivors, Inc. under State of Vermont Grant Agreement # 0315-A1931.

We do not make this request lightly. We believe strongly in the state mission of VPS, which is "to provide advocacy and mutual support that seeks to end psychiatric coercion, oppression, and discrimination." However, VPS's failure over the last few years to meet the obligations of its grant award has resulted in a significant erosion of our power and influence in advocating for change and additional resources. Many of our community members have tried to help VPS refocus on its mission and succeed in being the statewide resource that we desperately need. We can no longer overlook the dereliction of its responsibilities and obligations under its grant or keep quiet about the wasteful allocation of state funds to VPS.

Under its grant, VPS agreed to provide (1) statewide peer leadership and advocacy, education, and peer support; (2) Counterpoint Newspaper; (3) local, peer-operated projects; (4) patient representatives for individuals under the custody of the commissioner of the Department of Mental Health; and (5) community links for individuals leaving hospitals and returning to community living.

VPS is not providing statewide peer leadership, advocacy, or education. VPS is frequently absent from conversations with peer support leaders from around the state despite being invited. VPS has provided no testimony on bills currently in the legislature that impact the psychiatric survivor community (e.g., S.190, an act to establish a forensic facility). VPS did not acknowledge receipt of or submit a comment on the Mental Health Warrant Process Report disseminated on December 22, 2023. It has provided no advocacy activities and no educational activities as the grant requires. It has yet to appoint community members to committees and work groups to represent the interests of psychiatric survivors. For example, VPS was to have appointed three people to the forensic working group. It failed to do so and failed to solicit interested individuals from the community to fulfill its obligation.

We believe *Counterpoint* newspaper no longer centers a psychiatric survivor voice or narrative. The current editor does not interview psychiatric survivors. For example, in covering the 2023 Mad Pride march and celebration, the editor did not interview a single attendee or organizer.

It is already six months into this fiscal year and VPS has also not solicited any applications for its peer-operated project grants and in the past has failed to reimburse at least one grantee for expenses in a timely way. As of January 24, 2023, VPS's website says that POP grant applications are due by September 22, 2022.

In addition to these chronic failures to fulfill the obligations of the grant, we also have serious and specific concerns about VPS's fiscal management, hiring practices, organizational culture, and adherence to its by-laws, especially regarding membership and member meetings.

This letter by no means details all of VPS's failures and our concerns. We would be happy to meet to discuss our concerns in greater detail if you so desire.

In the meantime, we implore you to issue a Request for Proposal for an organization that will "develop and maintain an array of statewide activities, supports, and infrastructures to promote recovery, empowerment, and peer leadership, and ensure equal rights, protection and participation for individuals who have received psychiatric services."

Our community is entitled to a fiscally responsible organization that will provide the leadership and advocacy that it has contracted to deliver.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Calvin Moen	Zen Q Muhammad
Chris Hansen	Taryn Heon
Hilary Melton	Currie Murphy
Wilda White	Laura Fairbanks
Malaika Puffer	Miriam Jones
Gloria Van Den Berg	
Kaz DeWolfe	
J Helms	
Jessica Holder	

Cc: Patricia Singer, MD
Sara Merrow
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